

**THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT  
AND THE  
INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS  
RELATIONS, 1939-1945**

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## **THESIS DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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James Crossland

## **ABSTRACT**

Since its inception in 1863 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has pursued its mandate to bring succour to victims of war by strict adherence to its core principles of neutrality and impartiality when dealing with belligerents. The problems of carrying out this mandate during the Second World War were manifold. This was owing not only to the brutal nature of the conflict, but the numerous restrictions under which the Committee was permitted to operate. Although much has been written of the restrictions placed upon the ICRC by the German and Swiss governments and indeed, the Committee's own principles and statutes, the role of the British in determining the success or failure of the ICRC's mission has been mostly ignored by historians. This thesis addresses this problem by analysing the often difficult diplomatic relations between the ICRC and the British government during the Second World War.

Through examining these relations this thesis provides new insights into several key wartime events concerned with International Humanitarian Law, neutrality, prisoner of war history, espionage studies and the history of the British blockade in Greece and France. A new perspective will also be offered herein, on the ICRC's controversial and much maligned vice-president Carl J. Burckhardt, who was both the bane of British-ICRC relations and the Committee's most influential wartime member. In conclusion this thesis will argue that the role of the British government in the ICRC's wartime activities was both far more damaging than has been acknowledged and, paradoxically, of great importance for the long-term development of the ICRC into the multi-faceted humanitarian agency it is today.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

***'It is essential that the Committee should keep its activities untouched by politics in any shape or form'*** – Max Huber, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, 1928-1944

### **THE MISSING HISTORY**

The story of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the Second World War was one of struggle, perseverance and, in contrast to the above statement, politics and diplomacy. Although a humanitarian agency, obliged by the articles of the Geneva Convention to maintain neutrality in its relations with belligerents and impartiality in its services to victims of war, the need to 'reckon with politics without becoming a part of it'<sup>1</sup> has been a constant problem within the ICRC since its founding in Geneva in 1863.

During the Second World War the most notorious example of this problem was in October 1942 when the Committee's leadership elected not to speak out publicly against the Holocaust. The ICRC's fear was that by publicly condemning Berlin's policies it would both stray from its principle of neutrality and displease the Swiss Federal Council, which at the time was practising a policy of conciliation with Germany.<sup>2</sup> Thus the Committee's decision was both an act of neutrality and an example of shrewd, cynical diplomacy. Such is the complex nature of the ICRC.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross* (Geneva, 1979), p.59.

<sup>2</sup> See generally Jean-Claude Favez, *The Red Cross and the Holocaust*, eds. and trans. John and Beryl Fletcher (Cambridge, 1999). On Swiss-German relations in late 1942 see Neville Wylie, *Britain, Switzerland and the Second World War* (Oxford, 2003), pp.307-308, 239-241. On the closing of the Swiss border to Jewish refugees by the Federal Council at the time of the ICRC's non-appeal see Jean-François Bergier, *Switzerland and Refugees in the Nazi Era* (Berne, 1999) hereafter *Bergier Report*, Part 3 and Conclusion.

Unsurprisingly, the subject of the Holocaust non-appeal has dominated recent histories of the ICRC, which, for the most part, have been critical of the Committee's efforts during the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> As one historian has noted, since the opening of the ICRC's archives to the general public in 1996 the well-meaning philanthropists of Geneva have joined the Swiss government, Swiss banks and Swiss business in being scrutinised for their complicity in the Nazi regime's crimes.<sup>4</sup> It is, however, striking that few historians have thoroughly examined some of the key issues of the Holocaust non-appeal – the Committee's relations with belligerents, political motivations and character of its leadership – within a different Second World War context. The purpose of this thesis is to rectify this omission by analysing the diplomatic relations between the ICRC and the allied belligerent with which it had the most contact during the war years, the British government. In doing so three main issues will be addressed.

Firstly, by examining relations with an Allied government this thesis will explore a hitherto neglected field of the ICRC's diplomatic history, which has to date been generally focused on the Committee's wartime relations with Berlin and Berne.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, an examination will be made of the ICRC's attempts to expand its operations in response to the conflict and the British reaction to these endeavours – generally one of obstruction, objection and suspicion. Finally, this thesis will demonstrate how the ICRC's difficult

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<sup>3</sup> See Favez, *Holocaust*. Caroline Moorehead also begins her overview of the ICRC's entire history by documenting the Holocaust non-appeal – Caroline Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream: War, Switzerland and the History of the Red Cross* (London, 1998), introduction. David P. Forsythe addresses the ICRC's history in the Second World War by focusing almost solely on the non-appeal – David P. Forsythe, *The Humanitarians: The International Committee of the Red Cross* (Cambridge, 2005), pp.45-48; David P. Forsythe and Barbara Ann J. Rieffer-Flanagan, *The International Committee of the Red Cross: A Neutral Humanitarian Actor* (London, 2007), pp.13-17.

<sup>4</sup> Favez, *Holocaust*, foreword, p.ix.

<sup>5</sup> For ICRC relations with Berlin and Berne see generally Favez, *Holocaust*; André Durand, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross: From Sarajevo to Hiroshima* (Geneva, 1984), chs.7, 9; Forsythe, *Humanitarians*, pp.40-49.

relations with Whitehall over such issues as prisoner of war (POW) welfare and blockade policy shaped the evolution of the Committee's post-war development in terms of its capabilities and political status – a field of inquiry that has recently drawn the attention of not only historians but scholars of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and humanitarian diplomacy.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond legal and political fields, interest in the history of the ICRC and the Red Cross movement it engendered has also heightened in recent years. In regards to the Committee's role in the Second World War, however, the focus has been less on the ICRC's diplomatic history and more on the sanctity of its principles and the success, or lack thereof, of the Committee's work in the field. This trend was started by the ICRC itself which, until the mid 1990s, was the primary contributor to the writing of its own history. Unsurprisingly, this history de-emphasised the complexities of the Committee's political status by focusing on the humanitarian actions of its delegates and providing basic statistical information on its day-to-day operations.

To this end, in 1948 the ICRC published a three-volume report on its activities during the Second World War, covering – with infuriatingly variable details – everything from financial contributions to the personal exploits of delegates stationed in the Greek islands. One suspects the main purpose of this report was to provide weight to the ICRC president Max Huber's attempt to justify the sanctity of Red Cross neutrality in his *Principles and Foundations of the Work of the International Committee of the Red Cross: 1939-1946* (1946).

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<sup>6</sup> Two of the most recent works of note on the changing nature of IHL are *Just War or Just Peace?: Humanitarian Intervention and International Law* (Oxford, 2003) by Simon Chesterman and *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics* (New York, 2008) edited by Michael Barnett and Tom G. Weiss. For discussion of IHL with an emphasis on the ICRC's involvement see Forsythe and Rieffer-Flanagan, *Neutral Humanitarian Actor*, ch.3.



Little more than a pamphlet, Huber's work was a riposte to the ICRC's post-war detractors, and was as unsuccessful in its aims as it was flimsy in substance. This owed in no small part to Huber's romanticised view of Swiss and ICRC neutrality as an 'irrevocable political axiom',<sup>7</sup> sacred since Switzerland was deemed a neutral state by the terms of the Second Treaty of Paris in 1815. This notion has since been refined, with a clear distinction recognised between the legal precedent for Swiss neutrality and the maintenance of the ICRC's neutrality through its actions.<sup>8</sup> Huber's concept of neutrality was not his only opinion to ring hollow.

The other beliefs that characterised Huber's wartime presidency – humanity, charity and traditional Christian values – were an obvious advantage for the leader of a philanthropic organisation. In the midst of total war, however, these values were of negligible use and even Yves Sandoz – a supporter of Huber and current Committee member – has conceded that 'Max Huber probably placed too much faith in the virtues of the Red Cross ideal and system'.<sup>9</sup> It was this very ideal, however, that post war histories of the ICRC sought to promote.

Another ICRC member to take up the challenge of defending the Committee's ideals was one of its wartime heroes, Marcel Junod. His fascinating, if at times self-glorifying, memoir *Warrior Without Weapons* (1951) continued where Huber left off by emphasising the sanctity of the ICRC delegate's only 'weapon' in the field, namely the Geneva Convention, whose articles grant the

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<sup>7</sup> Max Huber, *Principles and Foundations of the Work of the International Committee of the Red Cross: 1939-1946* (Geneva, 1946), p.26.

<sup>8</sup> François Bugnion, 'Swiss Neutrality as Viewed by the International Committee of the Red Cross', 26 May 2004 – *ICRC Website*, <http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/629cix?opendocument> (accessed 18 November 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Yves Sandoz, 'Max Huber and the Red Cross', *European Journal of International Law*, 18, no.1 (2007) pp.171-197, *Oxford Journals* <http://ejil.oxfordjournals.org> (accessed 8 March 2008), p.197.

ICRC permission to function as a neutral humanitarian agency on the battlefield.<sup>10</sup>

Twelve years after Junod's book was released the ICRC marked its centenary by commissioning one of its active delegates, Pierre Bossier, to write the Committee's first official history *From Solferino to Tsushima* (1963).<sup>11</sup> Starting with the Battle of Solferino in 1859 – the bloody aftermath of which drove the Genevan businessman Henry Dunant to establish the Red Cross – the book covered the Committee's history only until the end of the Russo-Japanese war in 1905.

It took fifteen years for another ICRC delegate turned historian, André Durand, to provide the next chapter of the ICRC's official history which covered the ICRC's activities during the First and Second World Wars. *From Sarajevo To Hiroshima* (1978) was originally released only in French and was not translated into English until 1984. Drawing primarily on information already contained in the 1948 reports – with the occasional poorly cited source from Geneva's then closed archives – Durand nevertheless provided an invaluable contribution to our knowledge of the ICRC's history. However, like the work of Junod and Bossier, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima* was a heavily doctored account of the Committee's activities which once again lacked detail in crucial areas, whilst focusing on unnecessary minutiae in others.

With its archives still shut and its histories still official, by the late 1980s the ICRC had become 'wedded to a particular view of its history'<sup>12</sup> which offered

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<sup>10</sup> *Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded Armies in the Field* (Geneva, 1864), hereafter *Geneva Convention 1864*, Articles 1-3.

<sup>11</sup> This was the first of a series of four official books released by the ICRC covering its history. The latest in the series is *De Budapest à Saigon, 1956-1965* (Geneva, 2009) by Catherine Rey-Schyr.

<sup>12</sup> Neville Wylie, 'The Sound of Silence: The History of the International Committee of the Red Cross as Past and Present', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 13, no.4 (2002) pp.186-204, *Routledge*,

little in the way of objective analysis. Nicholas O. Berry's *War and the Red Cross: The Unspoken Mission* (1997) did little to improve this situation. Owing to the book's misguided argument – that the Red Cross movement abandoned its traditional mandate during the Cold War in order to pursue the goal of eradicating the practice of war altogether – Berry's work sits on the fringes of academic scholarship on the history of the ICRC.

A better effort came from George F. Hutchinson, who attempted to provide a detailed history of the Red Cross movement up until the First World War. *Champions of Charity: War and the Rise of the Red Cross* (1996) was a harsh assessment of the ICRC and the Red Cross movement it founded. Both the critical tone and the bitter nature of Hutchinson's argument – that the foundation of the National Red Cross Societies actually 'abetted the militarisation of charity'<sup>13</sup> – was likely to have been caused, in part, by the author's frustrating experience in the ICRC archives, which he described as being as accessible as those of the Kremlin.<sup>14</sup> Owing to the 'courteous stonewalling'<sup>15</sup> of the ICRC's archivists, therefore, Hutchinson's study was a limited one.

Prior to the release of Hutchinson and Berry's books a former rector from the University of Geneva, Jean-Claude Favez, was granted a greater degree of access to the ICRC's archives than any previous researcher. As a result of this work, in 1988 Favez produced the first history of the ICRC to focus specifically on the period of the Second World War: *Une mission impossible?* Landmark

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<http://www.informaworld.com> (accessed 2 November 2007), p.187.

<sup>13</sup> George F. Hutchinson, *Champions of Charity: War and the Rise of the Red Cross* (Boulder, 1996), p.350.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.3.

though it was, it took eleven years for the abridged English translation of Favez's work to be published as *The Red Cross and the Holocaust* (1999).

This book was the first thoroughly to scrutinise the ICRC's commitment to neutrality in the Second World War and revealed the Committee's complicity in the Swiss Federal Council's controversial relations with the Nazi regime. The process of translating Favez's pioneering work into English coincided with the aforementioned rise in public scrutiny of Switzerland's wartime history. This scrutiny was compounded by the uncovering of reports in the National Archives of the United States that were compiled by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during the war and which named ICRC delegates suspected of collaboration with the Nazis.<sup>16</sup> These allegations were swiftly and convincingly refuted by the ICRC.<sup>17</sup> The timing of the disclosure, however, did little for the Committee's embattled reputation and so in 1996 the ICRC attempted to exorcise the demons of its past by opening its archives to the general public.

Naturally, it was consideration of the ICRC's handling of the Holocaust that lay at the forefront of the first general history of the organisation to be written from the newly opened archives. This was Caroline Moorehead's, *Dunant's Dream: War Switzerland and the History of the Red Cross* (1998). As an overview of the ICRC's entire history the book was a valuable introduction to the subject, albeit one with a confusing and inconsistent method of referencing. In addition to its format *Dunant's Dream* was, in the words of its author, 'not an institutional history of the Red Cross', but rather 'a book about the people'<sup>18</sup> of the ICRC. The same can be said of Angela Bennett's *The Geneva Convention: The Hidden Origins of the Red Cross* (2006) which

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<sup>16</sup> The OSS was America's wartime intelligence agency and forerunner of the CIA.

<sup>17</sup> See ch.3, p.224

<sup>18</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, introduction, p.xxii.

recounted the quirky personal history of the ICRC's founders, Henry Dunant and Gustave Moynier, within the context of the Committee's early years.

Although invaluable for providing much needed colour and richness to the otherwise dry lexicon of credible ICRC history, the scope of Bennett and Moorehead's offerings meant that they only scratched the surface on details of the Committee's politics, organisation and means of operation. This was particularly true in regards to one of the most important areas of the ICRC's operational and diplomatic history: its work on behalf of POWs.

Although Favez briefly addressed this issue, his focus on the welfare of civilian victims of war meant that the topic of ICRC negotiations with belligerents over POW welfare was far from comprehensively covered. The best analysis of this issue, in terms of the history of the ICRC and the British government with which it dealt so closely in this matter, has been presented within the context of a more generalised history of the POW experience. Charles Rollings' *Prisoner of War: Voices from Behind the Wire in the Second World War* (2008), S.P. MacKenzie's *Colditz Myth* (2004), Vasilis Vourkoutiotis' *Prisoners of War and the German High Command* (2003), Jean Beaumont's article 'Protecting Prisoners of War: 1939-1945' (1996), Adrian Gilbert's *POW: Allied Prisoners in Europe: 1939-1945* (2006), Arie J. Kochavi's *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany* (2005) and John Nichol and Tony Rennell's *The Last Escape* (2003) have all contributed to our understanding of the ICRC's crucial work on behalf of POWs in the Second World War.

However, of these seven books only the ones by Kochavi and Nichol and Rennell have provided detailed insight into the tension that existed between the ICRC and the Allied governments on issues pertaining to POW welfare.

Furthermore, in both cases the authors have drawn the lion's share of their information on this topic from David Rolf's chapter, 'Blind Bureaucracy: The British Government and POWs in German Captivity, 1939-1945', which appeared in Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich's *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* (1996). Therefore, despite the evident volume of work produced on the POW experience, a comprehensive history of the ICRC's work on behalf of POWs in the Second World War is still to be written.

In terms of the ICRC's political and legal history, the Committee has continued the trend set in the post-war years of publishing from within its own ranks. ICRC members Yves Sandoz and François Bugnion are two of the more noteworthy contributors to the ICRC's web-based content on this topic. They have also written several clarifying articles on the ICRC's political status and mandate for the Committee's own journal the *International Review of the Red Cross*. Invaluable though these contributions have been, their provenance renders them questionable in terms of objective analysis.

Although a part-time consultant to the ICRC, David P. Forsythe is a more reliable source for commentary on the Committee's political and legal history, to which he has contributed significantly since the late 1970s.<sup>19</sup> Like Moorehead, however, Forsythe's scope is very wide and focuses primarily on the ICRC's post-war development, particularly in regards to IHL and the Committee's current role in civil wars. As such, with the exception of an occasional discussion on Favez's work on the Holocaust or the ICRC's ties to

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<sup>19</sup> In addition to writing extensively on human rights and the history of the United Nations, Forsythe has also published three books on the ICRC: *Humanitarian Politics: The International Committee of the Red Cross* (Baltimore, 1977), *The Humanitarians* (Cambridge, 2005) and, with Rieffer-Flanagan, *The International Committee of the Red Cross: A Neutral Humanitarian Actor* (London, 2007).

the Swiss Federal Council, little in-depth attention has been paid by the author to the Committee's Second World War history.<sup>20</sup>

Conversely, Rainer Baudendistel's *Between Bombs and Good Intentions: The Red Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936* (2006) offers a highly detailed analysis of the ICRC's diplomatic relations with belligerent governments, albeit within the closed context of the titular conflict.

In addition to specific Red Cross histories Neville Wylie's *Britain, Switzerland and the Second World War* (2003) contains invaluable information on the ICRC's relationship with the Swiss government.<sup>21</sup> Yehuda Bauer's, *Jews for Sale?: Nazi-Jewish Negotiations 1933-45* (1984) and Ronald W. Zweig's article 'Feeding the Camps: Allied Blockade Policy and the Relief of Concentration Camps in Germany, 1944-1945' (1998) have also provided a wider understanding of the ICRC's actions, or lack thereof, on behalf of the Jews, complementing Favez's more detailed work on the subject.<sup>22</sup> Even so, the role of the ICRC in the two aforementioned works is little more than that of a controversial walk-on extra in the drama of the Second World War. Once again, focused analysis on the ICRC's relations with belligerents beyond the context of the Holocaust is lacking.

In considering the aforementioned works the reader will realise that the diplomatic history of the ICRC in the Second World War – the linchpin of our understanding of the Committee's work on behalf of not only concentration camp inmates but POWs and civilian populations – is patchy, un-focused and

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<sup>20</sup> Forsythe and Rieffer-Flanagan, *Humanitarian Actor*, pp.15-17.

<sup>21</sup> See Wylie, *Britain and Switzerland*, pp.321-329.

<sup>22</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *Jews For Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations, 1933-45* (New Haven, 1994), ch.12; Zweig, Ronald W., 'Feeding the Camps: Allied Blockade Policy and the Relief of Concentration Camps in Germany, 1944-1945', *The Historical Journal*, 41, no.3 (1998) 825-851, *Jstor*, <http://links.jstor.org> (accessed 6 August 2007).

in need of a more acute analysis, which this thesis seeks to provide. By examining this missing history of the ICRC this thesis will not only enhance our understanding of humanitarian diplomacy in the Second World War, but it will also contribute greatly to the burgeoning field of research into the evolution of IHL over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Since its inception in 1863 the ICRC's development has been inseparable from that of IHL. It was the Committee's Genevan founders, Henry Dunant and Gustave Moynier, who in 1864 codified customary laws of war into the First Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field, the cornerstone of modern IHL.<sup>23</sup> The ICRC has, since the signing of that First Geneva Convention and with the agreement of the signatories, acted as the custodian and primary developer of IHL.<sup>24</sup> In this capacity the ICRC has, despite its status 'as a private association formed under the Swiss Civil Code', dealt with the highest levels of government and, more recently, has been granted observer status at the United Nations.<sup>25</sup> This privilege, bestowed upon an organisation that today comprises twelve thousand staff in eighty different countries,<sup>26</sup> is a testament to how far the concept of bringing impartial relief to wounded soldiers on the battlefields of Europe – the original plan of Dunant and Moynier's five man 'committee' – has come.

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<sup>23</sup> For the history of Dunant and Moynier's efforts to draft the First Geneva Convention see Angela Bennett, *The Geneva Convention: The Hidden Origins of the Red Cross* (Stroud, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> François Bugnion, 'The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Development of International Humanitarian Law', *Chicago Journal of International Law*, 5, no.1 (2004) pp. 191-215, *Proquest*, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed 11 October 2007).

<sup>25</sup> This status was granted on 16 October 1990 – Rona, Gabor, 'The ICRC's Status: In a Class of its Own', 17 February 2004, *ICRC Website*, <http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/5W9FJY> (accessed 11 October 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Information from ICRC website, [www.icrc.org](http://www.icrc.org) (accessed 9 March 2009).



## THE BRITISH AND THE ICRC BEFORE 1939

To believe that the ICRC's achievements to date have been made through adherence to the principle of non-political involvement as prescribed in the Committee's statutes is to look naively upon an organisation that, in the Second World War, played a complex political game with the British government. This game led certain ICRC delegates – in particular the Committee's Vice-president Carl J. Burckhardt – to both breach ICRC neutrality and, against British wishes, greatly expand its operations and capabilities. Both of these consequences, as this thesis will demonstrate, had a significant impact on the ICRC's future development. It is important to note that the disagreement between Whitehall and Geneva which contributed to these post-war changes was not instigated by the ICRC. Rather it was the fault of a British government which displayed 'confusion, ignorance and fundamental difference of opinion'<sup>27</sup> in its attitude towards the Committee throughout the war.

This attitude was not surprising. The British government had long misunderstood, or preferred to ignore, one of the fundamental principles of the ICRC – to assist all belligerents impartially. At the signing of the First Geneva Convention in 1864, for example, the British delegate rejected the idea of neutral voluntary Red Cross societies on the grounds that the British army already had adequate medical staff. When it came time to sign the Convention the delegate further evaded the issue by declaring he could not sign without a royal seal. This prevarication was countered by a quick-thinking Red Cross member who produced his penknife, cut a button from the Briton's tunic and declared 'there, your Excellency, you have the arms of Her Majesty'.

<sup>28</sup> The British delegate still refused and as such Britain did not sign and ratify

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<sup>27</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.390.

<sup>28</sup> Bennett, *Geneva Convention*, pp.67-68.

the First Geneva Convention until 1865. It was with reluctance and farce therefore, that Britain was dragged into relations with the ICRC.

In the years that followed the British continued to show reluctance towards the ICRC's plans to improve upon the landmark treaty. In 1874 the British government rejected a proposal by Henry Dunant to convene a second conference in Paris specifically for the purposes of discussing the treatment of prisoners of war – a crucial omission from the First Geneva Convention that was not addressed until 1929.<sup>29</sup> When further revisions were proposed in 1898 for regulating maritime warfare Britain, in marked contrast to the other nations of Europe, again showed little enthusiasm.<sup>30</sup>

British weariness of the ICRC's proposals continued into the twentieth century. In the Boer War of 1899-1902 Whitehall sought to block the Committee's attempts to have the Orange Free State ratify the Geneva Convention. Once this obstruction proved unsuccessful the British refused the ICRC's proposal that a British, Boer and Portuguese representative form an agency to help the ICRC manage the affairs of all victims of the conflict.<sup>31</sup> A similar line was taken by the British to ICRC proposals in the First World War that a conference be called to discuss the problem of POW welfare and repatriation. As had been the case in 1874, the British were satisfied with their handling of the issue and as such saw no reason to discuss POW matters

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<sup>29</sup> At the instigation of Tsar Alexander II a conference to discuss POW welfare took place in Brussels in 1874. The resulting 'Brussels Code' was never signed and ratified and as such was only accepted in principle as a code of conduct for dealing with capture enemy soldiers – Geoffrey Best, *Humanity in Warfare: The Modern History of the International Law of Armed Conflicts* (London, 1980), pp.156-57.

<sup>30</sup> Pierre Bossier, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross: From Solferino to Tsushima* (Geneva, 1963), p.366.

<sup>31</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, pp.139-140.

with other belligerents, particularly if such negotiations were to be conducted 'through the medium of the representations of a neutral weak state'.<sup>32</sup>

A policy had been set and was in place in Whitehall at the start of the Second World War: The British government would look after its own interests, whilst rejecting the efforts of an organisation they regarded as meddlesome and inadequate.

Were these perceptions justified? The results of the ICRC's efforts in the seventy-six years before the outbreak of the Second World War were, admittedly, mixed. Much work had been put into the codification of the laws of war; forty eight treaties and their amendments had been drafted and signed by 1939.<sup>33</sup> The ICRC's ability to implement those laws, however, was still highly questionable.

In the First World War the Committee's delegates gained access to POW camps, organised postal services for the prisoners and re-united families torn apart by the conflict, services which won the ICRC the Nobel Peace Prize in 1917. Yet, despite these achievements even André Durand, delegate turned historian, had to concede that 'breaches of the Conventions, or even the elementary rules of humanity, were numerous and specific'.<sup>34</sup>

The ICRC was similarly powerless in 1935-36 to stop Mussolini's armies from breaching the laws of war during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. In this instance not only were civilians and Red Cross installations bombed by the

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<sup>32</sup> National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, London, hereafter TNA:PRO, FO 383/473 – Prisoner of War Department (PWD) to British Red Cross (BRC), 13 April 1918; FO Minute, 18 April 1918; Bossier, *Solferino to Tsushima*, p.89.

<sup>33</sup> International Humanitarian Law – Treaties and Documents, *ICRC Website*, <http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/INTRO?OpenView> (accessed 9 March 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.48-49.

Italian air force, but the Gas Protocol of 1925, prohibiting the use of chemical warfare, was breached by Italy's use of mustard gas on Ethiopian troops. At best the ICRC's subsequent remonstrations with Mussolini served to show how ineffectual the Committee was at challenging totalitarian regimes. At worst it demonstrated how the Euro-centric, right-wing background of many of the ICRC's members led the Committee to turn a blind eye to Italian atrocities whilst accepting Rome's justification of retaliation for Ethiopian barbarity.<sup>35</sup>

In terms of its peacetime development, the Committee's sham inspections of German concentration camps in 1935 resulted in yet another failure. Many of the camp detainees at Esterwegen and Dachau were either restricted from speaking to the ICRC's inspector, Carl Burckhardt, or showed signs of intimidation when interviewed. The *SS-Gruppenführer* Reinhard Heydrich's interpretation of Burckhardt's reports also showed the ease with which governments could sidestep any course of action taken by the ICRC. Burckhardt's recommendation that the brutal commandant of Esterwegen, Hans Loritz, be removed from his post was agreed to by the Germans. He was re-assigned to Dachau which, under his supervision, became the model concentration camp of the Third Reich.<sup>36</sup>

Durand's references to these episodes in the ICRC's history highlight problems with the Committee which, at that time, understandably shaped the British view of the ICRC's competence. For all its drafting of laws and declarations of humanity the ICRC had no power to enforce these boundaries on the conduct of war. If, as I argue, this opinion was held by the British government then it

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<sup>35</sup> Rainer Baudendistel, *Between Bombs and Good Intentions: The Red Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936* (New York, 2006), pp.304-308. For discussion on the significance of Swiss-Germans and conservatives in the ICRC leadership see Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.303, 388; Forsythe and Rieffer-Flanagan, *Neutral Humanitarian Actor*, p.16, 27.

<sup>36</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.285-87; Eugen Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them* (New York, 1973), p.34.

was clearly correct in its evaluation. Ironically, however, Whitehall struggled throughout the war to accept the next logical step: if it was not the duty of the ICRC to enforce the Convention then it was the responsibility of its signatories – including the British themselves.

Distrust of the ICRC's competence to enforce the Convention and Whitehall's reluctance to allow anyone other than itself to look after British interests were not the only facets behind the troubled wartime relations between the British government and the ICRC. Many officials at the Foreign Office placed value judgements on the ICRC as a whole based on their pre-war relations with Carl Burckhardt.

Burckhardt, 'a rather dapper, smart, fresh-coloured Swiss aristocrat', initially joined the ICRC in the 1920s as a POW camp inspector in Turkey.<sup>37</sup> Aggrieved by the violence and deprivation there, he returned to the academic life shortly thereafter, becoming professor of history at the University of Zurich in 1926. It was indicative both of Burckhardt's desire to be at the centre of important events and cure the ills of a Europe beset by 'vulgarity and cruelty',<sup>38</sup> that he once again joined the ICRC in 1933 – the year of the Nazi *Machtergreifung*. Owing to the Committee's aforementioned failure in confronting Mussolini and Hitler, however, Burckhardt left the ICRC in 1936 and sought a more political means to preserve the peace in Europe. Accordingly, he volunteered for the post of League of Nations High Commissioner to Danzig and, with the help of his old friend, the State Secretary of the *Auswärtiges Amt*, Baron Ernst von Weizsäcker, he took up the position in January 1937.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Harold Nicholson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930-1964*, 3 vols., ed. by Nigel Nicholson (London, 1968), vol.2, 3 October 1939, p.39; Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.224.

<sup>38</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, citing Burckhardt letter from 1927, p.303.

<sup>39</sup> Ernst von Weizsäcker, *Memoirs of Ernst von Weizsäcker*, trans. John Andrews (Chicago, 1951), pp.146-47.

By virtue of his role in Danzig Burckhardt became involved in peace negotiations that required close contact with high-ranking Nazis. These included Hitler himself, whom Burckhardt met on two separate occasions in 1937 and, on the eve of war, in August 1939. After war broke out certain Foreign Office officials who worked with Burckhardt in Danzig, namely Sir George Warner and William Strang, remembered the High Commissioner's personal contacts with both Nazi leaders and the increasingly unpopular pro-peace Britons R.A. "Rab" Butler and Lord Halifax, whom Burckhardt had acted as peace emissary for in May 1939. This added yet more distrust to Whitehall's already disparaging view of the ICRC, particularly after the establishment of Churchill's "never surrender" policy in 1940.<sup>40</sup>

Burckhardt was not the only problematical member of the ICRC. Both Max Huber, the Committee's president, and Lucie Odier, the head of the ICRC's Relief Section, were humanitarian idealists who were often out of touch on the political and military realities of the conflict.<sup>41</sup> Jacques Chenevière, the head of the Committee's Central Agency for Prisoners of War, was cantankerous and stubborn and Rudolphe Haccius, head of the ICRC's London delegation, was regarded by his British hosts as not 'a very live wire'. As has been noted by Caroline Moorehead, in addition to the sometimes difficult personalities of individual ICRC members, the organisation as a whole was highly Euro-

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<sup>40</sup> For Burckhardt's relations with the Germans in Danzig see generally Herbert S. Levine, 'The Mediator: Carl J. Burckhardt's Efforts to Avert a Second World War', *The Journal of Modern History*, 45, no.3 (1973) 439-455, *Jstor*, <http://links.jstor.org> (accessed 16 March 2007). For discussion on Burckhardt's continuance of these relations during the war and peace talks with Halifax and Butler see James Crossland, 'A Man of Peaceable Intent: Burckhardt, the British and Red Cross Neutrality during the Second World War', forthcoming, *Historical Research*, vol.84.

<sup>41</sup> See ch.2, p.108-09.

centric, conservative and impatient in regards to British regulations that governed humanitarian action.<sup>42</sup>

The tenuous relationship between the ICRC and the British Red Cross Society (BRC), a separate Red Cross entity that was part of the League of Red Cross Societies,<sup>43</sup> was another problem. Formed in 1919 by the head of the American Red Cross, Harry Davison, the League originally comprised the National Red Cross Societies of Britain, the United State, France, Italy and Japan and had been a rival of the ICRC throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>44</sup> Although this rivalry had subsided by the start of the Second World War, there was still enough resentment on both sides for relations between the BRC and the ICRC to be difficult. As the Second World War began therefore, the ICRC had few friends in Britain.

## **THESIS STRUCTURE**

*Chapter I* of this thesis will examine the influence a poor BRC-ICRC relationship together with Whitehall's view of Burckhardt and Britain's misunderstanding of the ICRC's principles and duties had on the problem of adequately supplying British and French POWS in 1940. The chapter will conclude with a comparison between these early problems in British-ICRC relations and the relative cooperation that developed between the two sides in the wake of the unsuccessful British campaign in Greece and Crete in 1941.

*Chapter II* will assess British-ICRC relations in the context of a key component of the aftermath of the Greece and Crete campaigns: the British blockade of Greece. This analysis will demonstrate how, despite moderate improvements

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<sup>42</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, pp.389-90. For British views of Haccius see ch.1, p.80

<sup>43</sup> Known today as the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

<sup>44</sup> For discussion on the ICRC's early relations with the League see Hutchinson, *Champions of Charity*, ch.7.

in British-ICRC relations in early 1941, Whitehall conspired with the Swedish government and the Swedish Red Cross to undermine ICRC authority in Greece and Crete. The purpose of the British scheme will be explained by showing how Carl Burckhardt's plans for increased ICRC autonomy and an expansion in its relief capabilities threatened the British government's maintenance of a stringent blockade.

The purpose of *Chapter III* will be to assess how Burckhardt's plans for the expansion of the ICRC's traditional activities were linked to his desire to lift the Committee's reputation as a diplomatic entity and, in the process, to improve relations with the British government. To this end, this chapter will provide a new dimension to our understanding of one of the key events in POW history in the Second World War: the Shackling Crisis. It will also assess the ICRC's involvement – or lack thereof – in Polish and German calls for an investigation into the discovery of a mass grave of murdered Polish POWs in the Katyn Forest in 1943. In looking at these two controversial events of the Second World War, this thesis will argue that the ICRC became a more diplomatically and politically-minded entity in the war's middle years. The effect this change had on British-ICRC relations will be addressed by looking at Whitehall and the OSS' investigations into ICRC delegates stationed in North Africa and the Far East in 1942-43.

*Chapter IV* will conclude this thesis by assessing the two elements of the ICRC's wartime development – pragmatic and political – within the context of the Allied invasion of Europe. In doing so it will argue that despite British reluctance to cooperate with the ICRC during the invasion, the latter was able – owing in no small part to its better relations with Germany – to achieve great success during the breakdown of the Third Reich. The importance of this achievement in terms of the ICRC's post-war development will be discussed



by looking briefly at the relief efforts in Europe during the first months of peace. This examination will conclude that, despite its wartime achievements, vast expansion and desire to act as the coordinating relief body in Europe, the ICRC was rejected by the British and the Americans in favour of the un-tested United National Relief and Rehabilitation Association (UNRRA). The extent to which this decision was coloured by British-ICRC wartime relations and early Cold War politics will also be assessed.

In conclusion, this thesis will argue that, despite its disparaging view of the ICRC, its unwillingness to co-operate with ICRC initiatives and its suspicion of some of the ICRC members, the British government also *contributed* greatly to both the ICRC's wartime record and its post-war development, albeit at the expense of British-ICRC relations. To explain how this paradox came about, it is important to clarify how, and by what means, British-ICRC relations in the Second World War were established. As was so often the case, it was the ICRC – enthusiastic, determined, yet wearisome – who first extended the hand of co-operation. Few in Whitehall, however, were willing to shake it.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **PARCELS AND POWS**

#### **THE ESTABLISHMENT OF RELATIONS**

Official wartime relations between the International Committee of the Red Cross and the British government began on 14 September 1939, with the establishment by the ICRC of its British Section, a special department tasked with handling all cases of internment involving subjects of Britain and her Commonwealth. The British Section fell under the auspices of the ICRC's Central Prisoner of War Agency (the Agency), an internal body of the Committee that had first been instituted in August 1914.<sup>45</sup>

Deemed a crucial component of the ICRC, the duties of the Agency were codified after the Great War in Article 79 of the 1929 Geneva Convention:

A Central Agency of information regarding prisoners of war shall be established in a neutral country. The International Red Cross Committee shall, if they consider it necessary, propose to the Powers concerned the organization of such an agency. This agency shall be charged with the duty of collecting all information regarding prisoners which they may be able to obtain through official or private channels, and the agency shall transmit the information as rapidly as possible to the prisoners' own country or the Power in whose service they have been.<sup>46</sup>

By the ICRC's own admission the British Section of the Agency was 'only a small department' during the early months of the war, owing to the fact that until the Norway campaign of April 1940 only a few hundred British prisoners

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<sup>45</sup> *The International Prisoners-of-War Agency: The ICRC in World War One* (Geneva, 2007), p.3.

<sup>46</sup> *Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War* (Geneva, 1929), hereafter *Geneva Convention 1929*, Article 79.

of war were held by the Germans.<sup>47</sup> Yet despite this relatively small workload there was an undeniable zeal throughout the British Section and the entire Agency to set to its task of collecting POW information.

The driving force behind this attitude was the 'witty and tyrannical'<sup>48</sup> Jacques Chenevière, a brooding and determined senior ICRC official who had worked for the Central Agency during the First World War and, at the commencement of hostilities in 1939, was given the job of Agency director. Joining Chenevière in co-ordinating the ICRC's early wartime work was the Committee's president Max Huber, a lawyer, professor and former advisor to the Swiss Federal Council. Aggrieved at the outbreak of another war, yet motivated by his firm belief in the Committee's mission, Huber did not 'let a word of pessimism pass his lips' in the bleak days of September 1939, as he outlined to his delegates the duties that lay ahead for them.<sup>49</sup>

The third key member of the ICRC's leadership was Carl J. Burckhardt who, owing to his diplomatic experience in Danzig, assumed the role of the Committee's unofficial "foreign minister". Unlike Chenevière and Huber, however, Burckhardt was far from focused on placing the ICRC on a war footing. Rather, Burckhardt spent the first months of the war trying to engender a situation in which there would be no war to prepare for.

In November 1939 the Red Cross man was in London, officially for the purposes of being honoured for his services to the League of Nations.<sup>50</sup> There

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<sup>47</sup> The POWs were primarily composed of merchant seamen and downed airmen – *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross and its Activities during the Second World War*, 3 vols. (Geneva, 1948), hereafter *ICRC Report*, vol.2, pp.144-45.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with ICRC Delegate Jean Pictet cited in Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.373.

<sup>49</sup> Marcel Junod, *Warrior Without Weapons*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (London, 1951), p.141. For biographical details on Huber see Sandoz, 'Huber', pp.173-175.

<sup>50</sup> Nicholson, *Diaries and Letters*, vol.2, 3 October 1939, p.39.

is some evidence to suggest, however, that during this trip Burckhardt unofficially met Lord Halifax's Under-Secretary of State, R.A. "Rab" Butler, to whom Burckhardt pledged his assistance as a mediator in any British peace overtures. If so, this meeting was the first in a series of peace discussions that Burckhardt partook of from the final months of peace until the winter of 1940-41.<sup>51</sup>

Owing to the dissolution of his role in Danzig following the invasion of Poland, Burckhardt's return to the ICRC in September 1939 should have established his war time role as little more than a neutral humanitarian. Burckhardt's peace talks were an early sign that the ambitious Swiss was never going to accept such a politically irrelevant position in the great conflict. The extent to which Burckhardt was willing to abuse his privilege of Red Cross neutrality is evidenced by his attempt to contact certain Germans for peace talks. In March 1940 for example, Burckhardt travelled to Berlin for what was ostensibly an ICRC mission but was in actuality a meeting with the State Secretary of the *Auswärtiges Amt*, Baron Ernst von Weizsäcker.

Weizsäcker had befriended the young Burckhardt during the latter's early career in the Swiss diplomatic corps and, over the course of the 1930s the two men had forged a friendship that was based in no small part on their shared desire for peace.<sup>52</sup> To this end the two conspired throughout

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<sup>51</sup> Throughout the first half of 1940 Burckhardt also meet with Prince Max zu Hohenlohe, a representative of Goering's, Ernst von Weizsäcker and the British minister in Berne, David Kelly. Burckhardt resumed his peace-making activities in late 1940 and played a role in the negotiations leading up to the ill-fated flight of Rudolf Hess to Scotland in May 1941. For discussion see Crossland, 'Burckhardt'; Peter Padfield, *Hess: The Führer's Disciple* (London, 1991), pp.61-62.

<sup>52</sup> The sincerity of Weizsäcker's peace efforts is still debated by historians. See Leonidas Hill, 'Three Crises, 1938-39', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 3, no.1 (1968) pp. 113-144, *Jstor*, <http://links.jstor.org> (accessed 17 March 2007). Max Huber and Carl Burckhardt both wrote to President Harry Truman at the end of the war and vouched for Weizsäcker – *Truman Papers*, Burckhardt and Huber to Truman, 5 August 1949, Harry S. Truman Presidential Museum and Library, Independence: National Archives and Records Administration, [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/nuremberg/documents/index.php?](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/nuremberg/documents/index.php?)

Burckhardt's tenure in Danzig to thwart Hitler's bellicose plans and, unsurprisingly, these peaceable attempts continued into the war years, although with little success.<sup>53</sup>

Their initial war time contact in March 1940 was indicative of Burckhardt's approach to future overtures. Having spoken to Burckhardt of his intention to visit Berlin, the German consul in Geneva, Wolfgang Krauel, admitted to Weizsäcker that, although Red Cross matters would be on the agenda, 'Professor Burckhardt will be glad to use this opportunity to arrange, especially with you, Mr. State Secretary, a discussion of a general political character'. Krauel – who had conspired with Weizsäcker and Burckhardt in order to assure the latter's position in Danzig – made clear to Weizsäcker the form of 'political character' the conversations would take by mentioning that Burckhardt had recently met with an agent of Goering's to discuss 'any possible British peace projects'.<sup>54</sup>

As always with Burckhardt, these peace discussions went nowhere. Furthermore, as the noticeable lack of Burckhardt's name on ICRC correspondence in the Committee's archives during this period indicates, his commitment to these fruitless endeavours effectively removed him from the day to day operation of the ICRC during the early stages of the war.

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[documentdate=1949-08-05&documentid=1-10&studycollectionid=&pagenumber=1](#) (accessed 9 August 2008). Lord Halifax also wrote Churchill saying that Weizsäcker had 'done his best' to hinder Hitler's plans – Halifax Papers, York: University of York, A4.410/42 – Halifax to Churchill, 27 November 1948.

<sup>53</sup> For details on their pre-war peace seeking efforts see Klemens von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search For Allies Abroad 1938-1945* (Oxford, 1992), pp.101-102, 118; *Documents of British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, Series 3, vol.2 (London, 1980), hereafter *DBFP*, Warner to Halifax, 5 Sept 1938, doc.775, p.242; Appendix IV, Stevenson to Strang, 8 Sept 1938, p.689. For details on Burckhardt and Weizsäcker's connection to the German Opposition to Hitler see Ulrich von Hassell, *The Von Hassell Diaries: 1938-1944* (London, 1948), entries for 3 February 1941, p.156, 23 March 1941, p.163-64, 18 May 1941, p.176-177.

<sup>54</sup> *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945* (London, 1962), hereafter *DGFP*, Series D, vol.8 – Krauel to Weizsäcker, 1 March 1940, doc.645, p.833. For Krauel's collaboration with Burckhardt and Weizsäcker see Crossland, 'Burckhardt'.

Owing to Burckhardt's preoccupation, it was left to Chenevière and Huber – neither of whom were gifted as statesmen or had Burckhardt's ability to charm – to build the ICRC's early wartime relations with the British government.

In the autumn of 1939 these relations took the form of a letter-writing campaign by Huber and Chenevière, both of whom peppered Whitehall with demands for information on Germans interned in Britain, as well as presenting details of how the Agency intended to forward similar information regarding British internees to Whitehall.<sup>55</sup> It was a frantic effort by both men to get their house in order for the conflict ahead.

Contrasting this commitment and enthusiasm was a notably lethargic response from the British in the development of their own administrative apparatus for POWs, the War Office's Prisoner of War Information Bureau (PWIB). Like the Central Agency, the PWIB was an organisation whose genesis lay in the Geneva Convention, which specified that 'at the commencement of hostilities, each of the belligerent Powers and the neutral Powers who have belligerents in their care, shall institute an official bureau to give information about the prisoners of war in their territory'.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the Convention's allusion to immediacy, the British took longer than both the Germans and the ICRC to set up this most basic agency of POW administration. This prompted Huber to write to the Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax on 20 September requesting that the British follow the Germans in adhering to the Convention. This was followed by a second more overt

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<sup>55</sup> Archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, hereafter ICRC, G85/1047 – Chenevière to Warner, 17 October 1939; Huber to Halifax, 20 September 1939; Huber to Halifax, 6 October 1939.

<sup>56</sup> *Geneva Convention 1929*, Article 77.

request in early October which specifically asked for 'the name and address of the official Inquiry Office constituted by His Majesty's Government in Great Britain according to article 77 of the aforesaid Convention'.<sup>57</sup>

Considering Burckhardt's pre-war relationship with Halifax, it is tempting to conclude that the latter's tardiness in responding to Huber was born of a shared pre-occupation with peace, rather than a willingness to prepare for war. It is more likely, however, that Halifax's attitude was simply a reflection of that held by the entire Foreign Office which, most historians agree, was highly unprepared to deal with the primary issue in its relations with the ICRC – the welfare of prisoners of war.<sup>58</sup>

The small number of British POWs held by the Germans at that time was part of the reason for this sluggishness. However, as Colonel Harry Phillimore of the War Office wrote in his unpublished history of Whitehall's POW Departments, the primary fault of the British response to the POW issue lay in the complicated bureaucracy, which despite pre-war planning, was both haphazard in constitution and cumbersome in practice.<sup>59</sup> This poor practical response, combined with what Harold Satow from the Foreign Office recalled was a lack of foresight and imagination on the part of both the Foreign Office

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<sup>57</sup> ICRC:G85/1047 – Huber to Halifax, 20 September 1939; Huber to Halifax, 6 October 1939.

<sup>58</sup> Arie J. Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany* (Chapel Hill, 2005), pp.10-11; David, Rolf, 'Blind Bureaucracy: The British Government and POWs in German Captivity, 1939-1945' in *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* ed. Kent Fedorowich and Bob Moore, pp.47-97 (Oxford, 1996), pp.48-49; John Nichol and Tony Rennell, *The Last Escape: The Untold Story of Allied Prisoners of War in Germany 1944-1945* (London, 2003), pp.37-38.

<sup>59</sup> TNA:PRO WO 366/26 – Colonel H.J Phillimore, *History of the Second World War: Prisoners of War 1939-1945* (1949), hereafter *POWs in WWII*, p.11, 249. Phillimore was a retired member of the War Office's Directorate for Prisoners of War. Owing to the unwillingness of anyone from the War Office or the Foreign Office to edit the book, it was never published and still sits in its original draft form in the National Archives.

and the War Office, led to a dangerous malaise in Whitehall on the issue of POWs throughout the Phoney War.<sup>60</sup>

Notably, it was the ICRC which was the first to challenge this apathy in October 1939 over the issue of reciprocal visits by ICRC inspectors to POW camps in Germany and Britain. Huber's aforementioned correspondence with Halifax on the status of the PWIB was used as an occasion to raise the issue. The Committee's president pointed out that, with Geneva's roving delegate Marcel Junod visiting British POWs in Germany, the ICRC was eager to forward the reports to the relevant authorities in Britain.<sup>61</sup> It was this unsubtle hint that signalled the first instance of co-operation between the ICRC and the British who, having been informed of Junod's visit to Oflag XA (Itzehoe) on 23 September, accepted the ICRC's request for a reciprocal inspection of British camps holding German internees, the first of which took place on 6 November.<sup>62</sup>

The importance of this exchange of inspections cannot be over-emphasised. As the author of the Central Agency's post-war report lamented, 'the ICRC has no means of constraining a State to apply the Convention correctly, still less of imposing a penalty'.<sup>63</sup> This made the act of negotiating reciprocity between belligerents regarding the treatment of POWs central to the ICRC's ability to carry out its duties. As such this first success of guaranteeing reciprocal camp inspections was viewed by the Committee as nothing less than an act of confirmation by the belligerents of the ICRC's role as inspector of POW camps, after which 'the freedom of action of the delegates was not in

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<sup>60</sup> Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, p.10, citing H. Satow M.J. Sée, *The Work of the Prisoners of War Department during the Second World War* (London, 1950), p.5.

<sup>61</sup> ICRC:G85/1047 – Huber to Halifax, 6 October 1939.

<sup>62</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, pp.242-243.

<sup>63</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.223.



question'.<sup>64</sup> It was, in other words, the first instance in which the British accepted the validity of the services the ICRC had to offer and so agreed to co-operate with the Committee's humanitarian mission.

The man charged with carrying out the crucial November inspections in Britain was the Committee's representative in London, Rudolphe Haccius, an experienced delegate who had performed outstanding work on behalf of political prisoners detained in Hungary after the First World War.<sup>65</sup> Upon the establishment of the British Section Haccius had been despatched to Britain to head the ICRC's London delegation, though as a further testament to Whitehall's unpreparedness, he was not officially approved by the Foreign Office as the direct conduit for communication with Geneva until February 1940.<sup>66</sup> The reason for this was that the Foreign Office originally believed that Haccius' role was only to act as liaison between the ICRC and the British Red Cross which, many in Whitehall erroneously believed, was simply a branch of the Geneva organisation.<sup>67</sup>

Despite this slow start Haccius was undoubtedly a key figure in shaping ICRC-British relations, which strengthened in the wake of his and Junod's first round of reciprocal inspections, the details of which confirmed that both German and British camps were in good condition.<sup>68</sup> The ICRC's role as a friend of British POWs having been assured, in late November Major General Alan Hunter at

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<sup>64</sup> Oflag XA contained only 2 British RAF officers, the vast majority of inmates being Polish – Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.404-405; *ICRC Report*, vol.1, pp.242-243.

<sup>65</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.124-135.

<sup>66</sup> ICRC:G85/1047 - Dunbar to Haccius, 2 February 1940.

<sup>67</sup> The BRC corrected the Foreign Office's misapprehension in November 1939 – TNA:PRO FO 369/2547 – Undated FO Minute, November 1939; BRC to Shepherd, 18 November 1939.

<sup>68</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.243.

the War Office spoke of his desire for Junod to visit Britain and that 'the Bureau's relations with Monsieur Haccius are of the pleasantest'.<sup>69</sup>

Hunter also complimented the Central Agency's handling of POW information, noting in January 'with great satisfaction the expeditious way in which the International Committee disposed of the lists of British prisoners of war when received from Berlin.' On this matter Hunter also showed an understanding of the relationship between the Agency and the French Postal Service, the latter inheriting the sole responsibility for any POW lists, mail, or parcels once they had been given over to them by Geneva.<sup>70</sup> Mindful of this, when there was a slight mail delay in early January Hunter was quick to assure the London delegation that 'the time taken for the lists to travel from Geneva to London is, it is understood, largely a matter for the French postal authorities'.<sup>71</sup> Such intimate understanding of the means by which the ICRC carried out its functions was a rarity amongst the British. This understanding, combined with the genial tone of Hunter's remarks, indicates that in the war's early months the lack of extant work on POW problems led to relations between the British and the ICRC being simplistic and cordial.

The leisurely pace of events during the Phoney War also filled Huber with hope for both British-ICRC relations and the future workload of the Committee on behalf of Britain. So assured was he of the ICRC's work that he declared in January that he was:

now under the impression that a number of important points have been settled owing to the collaboration of our Delegate (Haccius) with the various Government Departments concerned as well as with the War Organisation of the

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<sup>69</sup> ICRC:G85/1047 – Hunter to Junod, 30 November 1939.

<sup>70</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.141.

<sup>71</sup> ICRC:G85/1047 – Hunter to Clouzot, 9 January 1940.

British Red Cross Society and Order of St John of Jerusalem. It would appear to us that in so far as has been possible in the period of his stay in England, the objects of his mission have been accomplished or are well on the way to accomplishment'.<sup>72</sup>

Such optimism was grievously misplaced. On 10 May 1940 the *Wehrmacht* pushed west into the Netherlands, Belgium and France, an action that resulted in the cornering of the British Expeditionary Force around Dunkirk later that month. By the time of France's capitulation on 25 June approximately 37,000 British POWs had fallen into German hands, a situation the ICRC's official historian described as leaving the Central Agency completely 'overwhelmed' with requests for information.<sup>73</sup> This difficulty in obtaining information, in conjunction with the sudden need to organise relief for such a large number of POWs, constituted the first major crisis in British-ICRC wartime relations.

In the recent literature discussing the POW crisis of 1940 the ICRC has emerged relatively unscathed even at the hands of its chief detractors. Jean-Claude Favez, for example, has attacked the overly bureaucratic and muddled nature of the Committee's organisational structure throughout the war, describing it as 'marked by improvisation, amateurism and even friction between individuals'. He does, however, single out Chenevière as being more alert to this issue than other ICRC officials. Despite general problems in the Committee's administration, the Agency itself was comparatively well managed, a 'veritable beehive' of people working tirelessly on the 'enormous index files on prisoners and civilian internees compiled on the basis of thousands of letters which reached Geneva every day'.<sup>74</sup> Even Caroline

<sup>72</sup> Haccius was briefly withdrawn to Geneva, however, by the end of May he had returned to Britain to inspect camps holding German POWs and civilian internees – ICRC:G85/1047 – Huber to Halifax, 19 January 1940; TNA:PRO FO 916/2587 – Satow to Chenevière, 27 May 1940.

<sup>73</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.484.

<sup>74</sup> Favez, *Holocaust*, pp.46-50.

Moorehead, whose book highlights the ICRC's naïve amateurism during the war's early years, concedes that following the fall of France both the Agency and the Committee's camp inspectors worked tirelessly to bring succour to POWs despite the manifold difficulties posed by the collapse of France.<sup>75</sup>

Arieh J. Kochavi presents a more nuanced view. In his opinion the ICRC tried, but ultimately failed, to adjust itself to the 'dramatic extension of its tasks and responsibilities' in the summer of 1940. Yet at least, so Kochavi argues, its actions were positively geared towards rectifying the situation, unlike those of Whitehall which was preoccupied with managing the avalanche of criticism heaped upon it by an increasingly incensed British public.<sup>76</sup> Nichol and Rennell also champion this view, arguing that the War Office deliberately deflected criticism of its handling of POWs onto both the ICRC and the British Red Cross Society and the St. John War Organisation, who 'unfairly bore the brunt of press criticism that "our boys" were getting a raw deal, while Churchill and his government got on with fighting the enemy'.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, in David Rolf's view, there 'can be little doubt that members of the government were more than happy to let the Red Cross and the St. John War Organisation shoulder the blame in public for the parlous state of POW relief'.<sup>78</sup> Before discussing the effects of the publicity issue on British-ICRC relations, it would serve at this juncture to determine whether such public criticism was wholly justified. How did the ICRC and the British respond to the POW crisis of 1940?

The first problem the ICRC faced was one which primarily concerned the Agency, namely, how to gather information on the freshly captured British

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<sup>75</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.377.

<sup>76</sup> Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, pp.25-26.

<sup>77</sup> Nichol and Rennell, *Last Escape*, p.39.

<sup>78</sup> Rolf, 'Blind Bureaucracy', p.51.

POWs and, once gathered, how to transmit this information to London in a timely manner. The necessity of this task was drawn from the Geneva Convention, which stated that the detaining power was to supply the Agency with lists containing the prisoner's name, date of birth, nationality, army number, POW number, address of next of kin and state of health. This was to be provided, moreover, with respect to Article 8 of the Convention, which declared that 'belligerents are required to notify each other of all captures of prisoners *as soon as possible*'.<sup>79</sup>

With roads damaged and communications cut in the aftermath of the battle for France, such immediacy in POW reporting was understandably lacking. However, the ICRC was not without prior experience of such a situation. Following the mass influx of Polish POWs into Germany in 1939, the Agency's system of reporting was beset by the 'destruction or limitation of means of transport, the congestion in official bureaux, the priority given to work of national importance', all of which rendered the Agency's traditional method of compiling long lists of prisoner details for periodical transfer both time-consuming and impractical.<sup>80</sup> This experience led to the Agency to make use of an innovation it had first experimented with during the First World War: the POW capture card. This was a postcard-sized document which was filled in with the necessary details by each individual POW upon capture and forwarded immediately by the detaining power to the Agency. The first of the near 13,000,000 of such cards to be received by the ICRC during the war arrived in Geneva from a captured British airman on 26 March 1940.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Italics are my emphasis – *Geneva Convention 1929*, Article 8.

<sup>80</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.2, pp.32-36.

<sup>81</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.417-21.

The use of the capture card was not the Agency's only tactic in the field of information gathering. Mindful of the work that lay ahead, Chenevière spent the first weeks of May expanding the Agency by establishing volunteer branches in twenty seven separate locations within Switzerland. These volunteers were used in conjunction with the revolutionary Hollerith Machines, six of which had been gifted to the ICRC early in 1940 for the purposes of cataloguing and sorting the capture cards.<sup>82</sup> As in the case of his first contact with the British in 1939, Chenevière was determined to keep the Agency's head above water.

As productive as these measures were, however, the successes of the ICRC's efforts were overly dependent, like so much of its wartime work, on the acquiescence of the belligerent powers, in this case Germany. The problem with reliance on the Germans was that, unlike the ICRC, they had been either unwilling or unable to learn from the Polish campaign and so in 1940 were utterly unprepared to handle their newly acquired British and French prisoners.

This news would have been surprising to the British government, which in addition to experiencing the relative smoothness of POW reporting during the Phoney War, had also received generally positive reports from both the ICRC and the Protecting Power<sup>83</sup> on the condition of German POW camps.<sup>84</sup> The

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<sup>82</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.2, pp.108-114.

<sup>83</sup> The Protecting Power and the ICRC were by way of their neutrality, the only two bodies given permission in the Geneva Convention of 1929, to act as POW camp inspectors and representatives of prisoner's interests. At the start of the war the then neutral United States served as Protecting Power until the attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, after which the role of Protecting Power fell to Switzerland.

<sup>84</sup> At the outbreak of the war there were 31 POW camps in Germany, comprising four main types. Stalags, which held non-commissioned officers and enlisted men, Oflags, which held officers, Marlags, which held Navy personnel and Stalag Lufts, which held captured airmen. In their reports for the first half of 1940 the ICRC and the Protecting Power rated them generally as either 'good' or 'very good' – Vasilis Vourkoutiotis, 'What the Angels Saw: Red Cross and Protecting Power Visits to Anglo-American POWs, 1939–45', *Journal Of Contemporary History*, 40, no.4

capture of so many enemy prisoners in the summer of 1940, however, led to swift and grave changes both in the quality of the camps and the process of POW capture and transit, the latter having a particularly adverse affect on the speed of POW reporting.

These changes in conditions were evident from the moment of capture when, owing to a lack of adequate transportation and the damage caused to railways and roads, many POWs were subjected to forced marches from France to the prison camps, which were located hundreds of miles away within the borders of Germany and Poland. In the tense atmosphere of these marches instances of brutality and breaches of the Geneva Convention by the often young and Nazified German guards were not unheard of. There were unprovoked beatings, shootings of stragglers and increasingly meagre rations for the exhausted prisoners, some of whom were executed after collapsing from hunger and fatigue. For those who kept their strength there was the added humiliation of being used as objects of propaganda by way of 'a circular march (which) was made by the Germans with the intention of impressing the local inhabitants with the number of prisoners'.<sup>85</sup> All of the above were incidents of mistreatment that were in flagrant violation of the Geneva Convention.<sup>86</sup>

Pock-marking this harsh journey was a system of hastily built transit camps housed within the shells of old barracks, sports grounds or schools, at which accommodation generally ranged from huts and tents to open air sleeping. Food, usually black bread with a thin soup made of little more than boiled bones, was scarce in these makeshift accommodations and running water not

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(2005) 689-706, *Sage Publications*, <http://jch.sagepub.com> (accessed 6 August 2007) pp.692-693.

<sup>85</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/14 – Various POW accounts compiled by the Protecting Power – 12 March 1942.

<sup>86</sup> *Geneva Convention 1929*, Articles 2 and 7.

always available. This left the camps 'stinking, overcrowded, rat-infested' and with 'no sanitation of any kind'.<sup>87</sup> The Dante-esque journey through these camps began not far from the point of capture at the nearest collection centre for the local *Wehrmacht* division headquarters. Here a basic headcount of the new arrivals was taken before sending them further behind the front lines to the larger main collection centre, or Frontstalag, where a second report on the number of prisoners was compiled and sent to the German Army High Command (OKH). From there the POWs were again transported to a mass collection centre, or Dulag, for interrogation, medical examinations and a final sorting according to their rank and health before at last being transferred, usually by poorly ventilated railway cars and cattle trucks, to their permanent Stalag or Oflag.<sup>88</sup>

What concerned both the British and the ICRC was that despite the number of stops made along the journey, very little POW information was getting through to the Agency and so onto Whitehall. This was despite the fact that POW numbers were forwarded from the transit camps to OKH and deaths in the Dulags were internally reported to the *Wehrmacht-Auskunftsstelle* (Armed Forced Information Office for Prisoners of War). This information however, was primarily kept for German records and despite this evident capacity for such reporting, the POW information specified by the Convention was still not being forwarded to the British until the prisoners arrived at their permanent camps. This left a sinister window of time in which German guards could, if they so wished, dispose of any unwanted British prisoners without consequence.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> S.P. MacKenzie, *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 2004), p.69 citing various accounts of prisoners from the Imperial War Museum.

<sup>88</sup> Vasilis Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War and the German High Command* (New York, 2003), p.44.

<sup>89</sup> In addition to reports of miscellaneous shootings during the marches to the camps, there were also rumours that the Germans had machine-gunned several RAF pilots who had bailed out and



In some instances this period of information blackout could last for two or three months, with some of the more valuable prisoners being kept for interrogation in solitary confinement within the Dulags and denied access to any Red Cross parcels.<sup>90</sup> During this time it was not unknown for German interrogators to commit a further breach of the Geneva Convention by issuing bogus Red Cross information forms, or even impersonating Red Cross officials as a means of extracting extra information from the prisoners – a practice that continued in certain Dulags until early 1944.<sup>91</sup> That such a ruse could be perpetrated further indicates not only the capacity of the Germans to gather the necessary information, but their willingness to keep it to themselves for as long as possible – an action that was in line with the OKW's (German High Command) view of the Dulags as centres of clandestine interrogation, rather than of humanitarian administration.<sup>92</sup>

The first British reaction to the lack of reporting came on 22 June when the Foreign Office wrote to the ICRC requesting that it contact the Germans for information pertaining to 100 recently captured sailors from the British warships *Glorious*, *Ardent* and *Castra*. The response to the Red Cross' subsequent overture to Berlin came two days later with the OKW issuing orders to all Stalags and Oflags to forward lists of the names of all new POWs every 10 days. This did not commence however, until 25 September and even then the Dulags – the first point of crucial information gathering on POWs –

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had their parachutes caught in trees – MacKenzie, *Colditz Myth*, p.37, 65; Vourkoutiotis, *POWs and OKW*, p.44.

<sup>90</sup> Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, p.73; Vourkoutiotis, *POWs and OKW*, p.193.

<sup>91</sup> The bogus Red Cross forms were still in use at Dulag Luft as late as August 1943, where some POWs were mis-treated for refusing to fill them in. It was not until spring 1944 that the ICRC confirmed that the practice of issuing these forms has ceased – TNA:PRO WO 32/18503 – Berne to FO, 2 August 1943; TNA:PRO FO 916/881 – Berne To FO, 16 March 1944.

<sup>92</sup> Vourkoutiotis, *POWs and OKW*, p.44.

were still not included in the order.<sup>93</sup> Understandably, this did little to allay British fears and two days after receiving the ICRC's report on its efforts Sir George Warner at the Foreign Office voiced his grim concern to Haccius over those prisoners 'who have fallen or died in "captivity"'.<sup>94</sup>

The ICRC persevered despite the relative failure of its various overtures and the intransigence of the German authorities. One of the more noteworthy ideas was for the delegates to visit the Dulags and Frontstalags in person in order to collect the necessary information firsthand, a practice that had been first implemented by the Committee – at the behest of the Germans – during the First World War.<sup>95</sup> The implementation of this practice was greatly hampered however, by the fact that the existence of many such camps 'was only reported very late by the detaining authorities, and the Committee's delegates were authorised to visit them only after long negotiations'.<sup>96</sup>

Pierre Descourtes' inspection of the massive interrogation centre at Dulag Luft (Oberursel) for example, did not take place until 18 October 1940 and although Roland Marti at the ICRC's Berlin delegation was able to visit Dulag VID in late August, he reported that the Protecting Power had been refused admittance in the interim on the grounds that the camp was still within zone of military operations. This indicated that the Dulag had been cut off from the outside world for close to two months. On occasions when visits were permitted to the Protecting Power's inspectors, such as in the case of the inspection of Dulag XII on 28 May, a return visit was not granted until late September. In the interim the United States Embassy's only source of

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<sup>93</sup> Vourkoutiotis, *POWs and OKW*, pp.137-138.

<sup>94</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2587 – Warner to Haccius, 26 June 1940.

<sup>95</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.67-69.

<sup>96</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.245.

information on the camps was the OKW – a channel that the British naturally regarded as highly unsatisfactory.<sup>97</sup> On the question of POW reporting via the Dulags therefore, it was the Germans who proved to be the thorn in the side of both the Protecting Power and the ICRC, who, unable to offer adequate reciprocity from the relatively prisoner-less British, were left powerless to change the situation.

German obstinacy was not the only problem the ICRC faced. Prompted by the capture of so many of its soldiers the British government began, on the day before the start of the evacuation of Dunkirk, the long-overdue re-organisation of its POW administration. Though undoubtedly a necessity, the restructuring was both abrupt and ill-managed, resulting in what one historian has referred to as 'blind bureaucracy' in the face of a crisis that demanded efficiency and organisation.<sup>98</sup>

The biggest change was at the War Office, where in addition to the PWIB a specialised Directorate of Prisoners of War (DPW) was created on 25 May 1940. Headed by Major-General E.C. Gepp, the DPW was tasked with safeguarding the rights of British POWs with respect to the Geneva Convention, a broad mandate that made it Whitehall's central administrative response to the crisis and linchpin for two other agencies tasked with handling the practical and political issues of POW management. For the latter duty the DPW was assisted by the Prisoner of War Department (PWD) at the Foreign Office, whose job was to deal with Berlin on a diplomatic level with all matters relating to POWs via both the Protecting Power and the ICRC.<sup>99</sup> In this

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<sup>97</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2576 – WO to FO, 3 September 1940; TNA:PRO FO 916/2591 – US Embassy to FO, 15 August 1940, FO to WO, 16 November 1940.

<sup>98</sup> See Rolf, 'Blind Bureaucracy'.

<sup>99</sup> TNA:PRO WO 366/26 – *POWs in WWII*, pp.10-15.

capacity the PWD became the British governments' primary liaison with the ICRC on POW matters throughout the war.

The third body to lend assistance to Britain's POWs was the British Red Cross (BRC), which had merged on 2 September 1939 with the Order of St. John of Jerusalem under the leadership of the veteran philanthropist Sir Arthur Stanley.<sup>100</sup> On 5 December 1939 the BRC was approved by the PWD as 'the accredited authority for packing and despatching parcels to British prisoners of war',<sup>101</sup> a position it had already prepared for by the establishment of two giant Red Cross parcel depots in London in November 1939. The task of despatching the parcels was to be facilitated by the ICRC, whose duty was to organise and supervise the transport of BRC packages to Geneva and the further carriage of the parcels to POW camps throughout mainland Europe.<sup>102</sup> The BRC therefore, was not only closely connected to the ICRC both in its philosophy and sphere of activities, but had, unlike the DPW, been highly active since the commencement of hostilities in collaborating with the ICRC to bring assistance to POWs.<sup>103</sup>

On paper this multi-layered response to the POW crisis appeared to be more than adequate in that it covered the administrative, diplomatic and practical spheres of the problem. In practice, however, there were complications. The DPW for example, despite being tasked with holding POW information that had been transmitted via the Central Agency, initially possessed no-one on its staff who could speak either French or German. This resulted in the

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, pp.50-51. Stanley had been chairman of the Executive Committee of Red Cross Societies and had worked alongside Chenevière during the re-organisation of the Red Cross administration in the 1920s – Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.176.

<sup>101</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/116 – BRC Report of activities, 2 September 1940.

<sup>102</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, pp.201-202.

<sup>103</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p. 423; Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.384.

information having to be sent back to the PWD for translation – all of which added further delays to the process of transmitting POW information to worried relatives.<sup>104</sup> The BRC was also dissatisfied with the DPW's handling of information on missing and wounded POWs, which would bounce from Geneva to Whitehall and then onto the War Office's Casualty Branch in Liverpool, before at last returning again to the BRC's War Department in London – a system of reporting which could add up to ten days of needless delay in the forwarding of information to relatives of the POWs.<sup>105</sup>

Of greater gravity was the negative effect these sudden administrative changes had on Whitehall's co-operation with the ICRC. As Moorehead has argued, Whitehall's interactions with the ICRC at this time were defined by an attitude of 'confusion, ignorance and fundamental differences of opinion' over the nature of the Committee's tasks.<sup>106</sup> It would be erroneous, however, to believe that this attitude arose in a spontaneous and widespread fashion throughout Whitehall. Although there were certainly pre-existing issues – the most obvious being the divergence between Whitehall's objective to conduct war and the ICRC's to alleviate the effects of it – the source of British negativity towards the ICRC in summer of 1940 can be primarily traced to one man: the head of the PWD, Sir George Warner.

Ostensibly, Warner was well suited to be the primary conduit for relations with the ICRC. He was an experienced Foreign Office official who had not only attended the Geneva Conference in 1929, but had also served as British minister in Berne from 1936 until the end of 1939. It was at this post, however, that his first suspicions over the nature of the ICRC may have been

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<sup>104</sup> Rolf, 'Blind Bureaucracy', pp.49-50.

<sup>105</sup> British Red Cross Society, *British Red Cross and the Order of Saint John Of Jerusalem War History*, 2 vols. (London, 1947), hereafter *BRC Report*, vol.2, p.515.

<sup>106</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.390.

aroused. As mentioned in the introduction, Warner had first hand experience of Carl Burckhardt's forays into amateur peace-making during his tenure in Danzig.<sup>107</sup> These experiences stayed with Warner. During the war he not only raised concerns over Burckhardt's 'independent views' and fondness for playing the part of an important continental figure, but as late as 1944 Warner warned his Foreign Office colleagues that Burckhardt had pro-Fascist sympathies.<sup>108</sup> This opinion combined with the Foreign Office's knowledge of Burckhardt's peace-making activities and the fact that the latter held a leadership role at the ICRC led to Warner in particular viewing the Committee with weary suspicion.<sup>109</sup>

In addition to these personal opinions over the ICRC's credibility, Warner also suffered from a problem that was endemic amongst many officials in Whitehall's POW departments at this time – the inability to comprehend and keep pace with the speed of events. Though he had voiced unofficial concerns to Haccius in late June, it was not until 14 August that Warner wrote a stiffly worded complaint to the ICRC's London delegation wherein he formally cited the Geneva Convention article concerning the Central Agency's duty to report POW names, stating that:

we do not appear to be receiving such weekly lists from the International Red Cross Society (sic). It is of the greatest urgency that we should receive full and adequate information concerning all prisoners of war in the hands of the enemy powers and I should be extremely grateful for your co-operation in this matter.

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<sup>107</sup> Warner had received Burckhardt in Berne during the latter's peace mission on behalf of Ernst Weizsäcker during the Munich Crisis – *DBFP*, Series 3, vol.2, Warner to Halifax, 5 Sept 1938, doc.775, p.242.

<sup>108</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/113 – Berne to FO, 17 Oct 1941; Berne to FO, 19 Oct 1941; TNA:PRO FO 371/20756 – Berne to FO, 6 Feb 1937; TNA:PRO FO 371/39852 – Warner to Cadogan, 1 May 1944.

<sup>109</sup> David Kelly informed the Foreign Office in July 1940 that Burckhardt was still using his neutral status to talk peace with the Germans - Kelly, David, *The Ruling Few* (London, 1952), pp.273-74; TNA:PRO FO 371/24407 – Kelly to FO, 8 July 1940.

This was written almost two months after the surrender of France, though in tone and verbiage it reads as if Warner had only just realised the gravity of the POW reporting situation and, indeed, had yet to realise the unassailable difficulties posed to the Committee by the German attitude.

This apparent ignorance was despite the fact that Warner knew at the very least that the ICRC was experiencing difficulties in keeping its communications intact. Throughout June Warner received and dismissed proposals from the ICRC for the setting up of a Red Cross plane service that would fly under protection of the emblem in order to deliver POW mail and parcels. In this refusal he was justified, since at that time there were widely held British suspicions that the *Luftwaffe* was using its own Red Cross-branded planes in the Channel for surveillance purposes.<sup>111</sup> Even so, the fact Warner received these messages indicates that he was aware of the ICRC's difficulties. Moreover, he continued to offer little support for the Committee's attempts at overcoming them, waiting nearly three months to respond to another request by the ICRC for a similar cross-channel ship service. Of further frustration for the ICRC was the non-committal nature of the response, which stated – after three months deliberation – only that 'these questions present much difficulty and that no decision had been come to'.<sup>112</sup>

Warner was also out of step with the ICRC on the matter of the Agency's expansion of duties during the crisis and, more specifically, the need to fund this expansion. Prior to the invasion of France the transmitting of POW information by the Agency to the PWIB was conducted free of charge via the

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<sup>110</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44 – Warner to Haccius, 14 August 1940.

<sup>111</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol1, p.139-40; ICRC:G3/3B Carton 44/1 – Air Ministry Bulletin, 1 August 1940.

<sup>112</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44 – Warner to Haccius, 8 October 1940.

Swiss and French postal services.<sup>113</sup> Owing to the disruption to postal communications in Western Europe, the Agency was forced to abandon its reliance on mail and, on 18 June it began to send any POW information it was able to gather via telegraph.<sup>114</sup> Though expeditious and successful, this innovation placed a new financial burden on the ICRC and in August Chenevière wrote to Warner's successor in Berne, David Kelly, begging him to convince the Cable and Wireless Company in London to agree a lower tariff for the ICRC. In justifying the request Chenevière did not mince his words, pleading with Kelly to understand that it was 'practically entirely in the British interest', before going on to lament that 'our funds are already overdrawn by the manifold activities we dedicate to the prisoners of war, one of the chief items being the tremendous expense incurred in cabling all information to London'. This, plus the letter's many references to how such financial burdens were slowing up the speed of information transmission, made it clear that the ICRC saw the injection of funds as a means of easing the crisis and an appeal to the British sense of self interest as the best way to obtain them.<sup>115</sup>

Unfortunately for Chenevière, the concept of the British helping the ICRC to help themselves was proving difficult to grasp in Whitehall, where the question of British financial donations to the Committee had in fact been under discussion since the beginning of May when it was discovered that Haccius had been paying from his own pocket for the transmission of POW telegrams. The British Red Cross leadership had, in turn, asked Warner to speak to the Treasury about funding for their Swiss counterparts. Warner thought it 'reasonable to support such a request'. Tellingly, however, he emphasised the need to 'lay down exactly what the International Committee

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<sup>113</sup> This was in accordance with the 1935 Cairo Postal Convention – *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.11.

<sup>114</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.2, p.145.

<sup>115</sup> ICRC:G85/1047 – Chenevière to Kelly, 26 August 1940.



are supposed to do' before authorising the funding.<sup>116</sup> Despite Warner's apparent acquiescence, the Cable and Wireless Company initially refused the proposal and a further appeal from the ICRC to the PWD on 10 July never received a response from Warner.<sup>117</sup>

Such negligence was an ominous sign of things to come from Warner, who was as unsure of the importance of the ICRC's role in the coming crisis as he was occasionally confused over the name of the Committee itself, minuting that the 'claims of the IRCC (sic) as to services rendered are very exaggerated'. He also struggled, like so many British officials before him, with the notion of the ICRC as an organisation mandated to serve *all* belligerents, complaining that 'it may be said that the essential expenditure of the IRCC on objects in which we have a real interest cannot be considerable. We are really being asked to contribute to the maintenance of *Allied P/W* to a great extent'.<sup>118</sup> This conclusion was no doubt drawn from information on the ICRC's expenses provided by Chenevière to the Foreign Office in April, which indicated that the lion's share of the Committee's funds was being spent on Polish POWs.<sup>119</sup> Following the fall of France, however, the bulk of the ICRC's expenditure was for the benefit of British and French POWs. Moreover, the financial resources required for this were, owing to the large numbers of prisoners, hopelessly inadequate.

This change in conditions was not appreciated by either Warner or officials at the Treasury, who agreed with Warner that the ICRC's workload was not that great and, furthermore, that 'it does not appear from the figures given in the

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<sup>116</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2587 – Warner Minute, 17 May 1940.

<sup>117</sup> Over a year later Chenevière was still asking for Whitehall's reply to the initial message – ICRC:G85/1047 – Chenevière to Roberts, 29 September 1941.

<sup>118</sup> Italics are my emphasis – TNA:PRO FO 916/2587 – Warner Minute, 3 June 1940.

<sup>119</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2587 – Central Agency Funding Report, 14 April 1940.

enclosure to your letter that the Committee are in immediate financial difficulties'. Despite this reluctance, the Treasury did approve a donation of £4,000 per month for the cost of POW telegrams, provided that the Germans would respond with a financial gift of their own to the ICRC, a practice of reciprocity that had been established by the Treasury during the First World War.<sup>120</sup>

Although at first glance generous, the £4,000 grant was part of the total SFr70,800 donated by the British to the Committee during 1940 and, as a rather embarrassed David Kelly pointed out to the Foreign Office later that year, it barely made a ripple in the Committee's £200,000 monthly administration costs, much of which was being covered by the Germans and the French.<sup>121</sup> As a measure of how little the British appeared to understand both the expansion of the ICRC's duties and, moreover, the dependence British POWs now had on the successful completion of such duties, it should be further noted that France had donated SFr172,000 and Germany SFr98,426.25 for the year 1940. Even defeated Poland managed to produce SFr13,735.86.<sup>122</sup>

The British decision over limited funding and Warner's reluctance to pursue the Cable and Wireless issue was not entirely born of ignorance of the ICRC's workload. Over the summer of 1940 the notion that Switzerland – a 'neutral island surrounded by enemy seas'<sup>123</sup> – would soon be submerged was taken seriously by many in Whitehall. These concerns had begun as early as the

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<sup>120</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2587 – Syers to Warner, 21 June 1940. For First World War agreement on this principle see TNA:PRO T 1/12148 – PWD to Treasury, 15 January 1918.

<sup>121</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2587 – Kelly to FO, 26 December 1940.

<sup>122</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, Annex 1, Financial Contributions 1938-1946.

<sup>123</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2587 – Syers to Warner, 21 June 1940.

middle of May, when reports of a planned German invasion of Switzerland began to surface at the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) station in Zurich.<sup>124</sup>

Naturally, this influenced Warner's view of the ICRC which, he believed, would be drawn by the seemingly inevitable invasion into the Nazi sphere of influence. Although his experiences in Switzerland had convinced him that the tiny Alpine nation would 'put up a strenuous resistance' to any invasion, Warner believed that such resistance could only be successful 'pending the arrival of the strong support which they can expect from the other side of the Jura'.<sup>125</sup> With the collapse of France in late June this scenario became untenable. Warner's handling of the ICRC during the summer of 1940 was dictated by the belief that any financial assistance given to the ICRC would ultimately only be of benefit to the Germans.<sup>126</sup>

For its part, the ICRC did little to alleviate British anxieties. At the height of the May invasion scare, Halifax asked Kelly to raise the invasion scenario with Chenevière, who revealed that despite informal discussions no plans had been made by the ICRC for such an eventuality. In a mis-guided attempt to assure the British of the ICRC's resolve, however, Chenevière stated that in the event of a German invasion 'there could be no thought of the International Committee leaving Geneva'.<sup>127</sup> It soon became apparent to the British that this was no flippant declaration. The day before France signed the armistice Burckhardt affirmed to the British Consul in Geneva, Harry Livingston, that

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<sup>124</sup> For discussion of German plans for an invasion of Switzerland see Wylie, *Britain and Switzerland*, pp.166-173; Stephen P. Halbrook, *Target Switzerland: Swiss Armed Neutrality in World War II* (Rockville Centre, 1998), ch.5.

<sup>125</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/24530 – Warner's Political Review of Switzerland, 4 January 1940.

<sup>126</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2587 – Warner Memo, 11 June 1940.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid – Kelly's Report to Halifax, 21 May 1940.

the Committee intended to continue working no matter what fate may befall Switzerland.<sup>128</sup> The leadership was in agreement: the ICRC would go on.

This desire of the Committee to either fall on its sword or, more unrealistically, hope that the Germans would allow a pocket around Geneva to remain neutral, gave the exact opposite impression to that which it wished to convey to the British. Chenevière and Burckhardt's defiance was not interpreted as evidence of the Committee's intractable determination, but as an example of the Committee's arrogance and naïveté, a naïveté which would only serve to engender a nightmare scenario in which the primary organisation for humanitarian relief in Europe would be placed under Nazi control. This attitude not only affirmed Warner's belief of the ICRC as being little more than well meaning amateurs, but it also justified British apprehensions over offering financial support to such an apparently doomed organisation. Given the dominance of the Germans, the seemingly inevitable invasion of Switzerland and the military and financial uncertainties Britain faced in 1940, such reluctance to assist the ICRC was understandable.

There were however, other more unreasonable factors which coloured the British POW administration's attitude to the ICRC during and after the uncertain weeks of May and June 1940. Chief among them was Warner's perception of the Protecting Power as the only credible channel through which to conduct POW matters. With regards to the inspection of POW camps Warner was technically correct. The Geneva Convention stated that only the Protecting Power was guaranteed the right to inspect the camps, the ICRC having to rely on the informal and reciprocal agreement of the belligerents to grant its inspectors admission. Though agreement by the belligerents for such visits had been assured in November 1939, further inspections by the ICRC

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<sup>128</sup> ICRC:G85/1047 – Burckhardt to Livingston, 21 June 1940.

had focused more on civilian internment camps rather than POW camps, the latter being mostly handled by the Protecting Power.<sup>129</sup> On the matters of both POW reporting and the supply of POW parcels, however, Warner's opinion was completely erroneous. The Geneva Convention specified that the distribution of relief to camps was the duty of 'societies for the relief of prisoners of war' and not the Protecting Power.<sup>130</sup>

Despite his knowledge of the Convention, Warner continued to believe that the ICRC:

have rendered valuable help in connection with the Red Cross message scheme for which they act as a channel, they keep a stock of clothing etc in Geneva on behalf of the British Red Cross which is used for recent captures, they conduct searches for missing. Otherwise most of their work so far as we are concerned overlaps with the work of the US and Swiss diplomatic missions.<sup>131</sup>

The main problem with this ill-informed viewpoint was that it placed too much emphasis on the importance of the Protecting Power and not enough on the ICRC. Moreover, Warner held to this view at a time when, owing to the chaotic conditions in Europe, the services of the American inspectors were proving to be highly inadequate.

This led the U.S. Embassy to float the idea in Britain of asking the ICRC also to begin regular camp inspections. When the question was posed to Warner he showed his unawareness by stating that 'the U.S. Embassy has hitherto made sufficient visits to the camps and I took it for granted that as the P/W population increased they would visit the new camps'. Having been informed otherwise, Warner begrudgingly decided that it was worth asking the ICRC to

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<sup>129</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, pp.228-229; *Geneva Convention 1929*, Article 86.

<sup>130</sup> *Geneva Convention 1929*, Article 78.

<sup>131</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2587 – Warner Minute, 3 June 1940.

'do what they can'; although he held little optimism for the Committee's success, pointing out that 'the US Embassy is in a more independent position than the IRCC (sic) which is only a body of Swiss, mostly Genovese'.<sup>132</sup>

This impression of the ICRC was not confined to the services it could offer British POWs in France. When, ten days earlier, Warner had been asked about working with the ICRC in setting up a POW Bureau for prisoners captured in the Middle East, he replied that despite being 'anxious to keep on good terms with them', there was no need to 'complicate this question by bringing in the International Committee of the Red Cross'. Once again his justification was that the ICRC's 'work in the present case is a mere duplication of the work carried on through the official channel, they have no special means of communication and their position in is in fact rather precarious'.<sup>133</sup> In Warner's eyes therefore, the Committee was as imperilled by recent events as it was unqualified to handle them.

It was perhaps owing to the 'excellent understanding' between the DPW and the PWD – which one War Office official, ironically, presented as a positive aspect of the British POW administration<sup>134</sup> – that Warner's negative view of the ICRC permeated into the DPW. Despite his initial enthusiasm for the ICRC, Alan Hunter shared Warner's perception of the ICRC as the well-meaning inferior of the Protecting Power. Although he applauded the efforts of the Agency, he wrote in June that he was 'sorry that the International Committee should be the channel of communication, as I have held all along that general efficiency is best served by strictly adhering to the diplomatic channel in all questions of principle'. In this instance, the principle was the reciprocal

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<sup>132</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2546 – Warner Minute, 12 July 1940.

<sup>133</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2598 – Warner Minute, 2 July 1940.

<sup>134</sup> TNA:PRO WO 366/36 – *POWs in WWII*, p.19.

exchange of dead soldier's personal effects which, although certainly an area of concern for the Protecting Power, nevertheless had been initially raised by the ICRC earlier in the year.<sup>135</sup>

Such knee-jerk repudiation and indeed, suspicion, of the ICRC might have been understandable had the Committee's enthusiasm and desire to expand its operations been a new phenomenon in British-ICRC relations. By the summer of 1940, however, the British should have been accustomed not only to the Committee's eagerness to serve, but also its capacity to back such intentions with action.

Max Huber had been in almost continual dialogue with the Foreign Office since the start of the war, attempting, with varying degrees of success, to get his Committee involved in everything from arranging the reciprocal exchanges of sick and wounded POWs to increased protection of POW camps from air raids, the latter objective proving an issue of particular difficulty with the British.<sup>136</sup> In March 1940 Chenevière had also provided the Foreign Office with an explicit report on the tasks and achievements of the Central Agency to date, a gesture that was clearly made with the aim of educating the British as to the ICRC's capabilities.<sup>137</sup> In other quarters, the Ministry of Economic Warfare (MEW), the British government department tasked with managing the blockade of Europe, had also worked closely with the ICRC and other

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<sup>135</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2577 – German Legation to Swiss Federal Political Department, 21 May 1940; Hunter To Satow, 7 June 1940.

<sup>136</sup> TNA:PRO DO 35/997/10 – FO to Dominions Office, 8 May 1940; TNA:PRO FO 916/2577 – Warner to Haccius, 29 August 1940. Despite Berlin's openness to the idea, the British refused the ICRC's pleas to reveal the locations of all POW camps in order that bombers might be diverted from attacking such zones. The only concession offered by the British on this point occurred in April 1941 with a commitment to improve POW camp air raid shelters – *ICRC Report*, vol.1, pp.306-309.

<sup>137</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2587 – Report on the Activities of the Central Agency.

departments at the Foreign Office on the matter of guidelines for collective parcel distribution to POWs following the invasion of Poland.<sup>138</sup>

Yet despite this evident willingness on the part of the ICRC, the new POW administration continued to receive them coolly, even after Warner noted that there was 'less likelihood of a German attack on Switzerland'.<sup>139</sup> Whilst this reserved attitude might have been justified by ICRC failures, the fact is that in the face of overwhelming difficulties and discounting the obvious restrictions imposed upon it by the German authorities, the Committee was generally successful in its endeavours. In addition to Chenevière's aforementioned efforts to expand the Agency, the Committee responded with lightning efficiency to the July request to help the Protecting Power with POW camp inspections. Within 48 hours of receiving Warner's approval, Geneva had despatched Marcel Junod and Roland Marti to the camps. One month later the ICRC reported that both Junod and Marti had visited almost all POW camps in Germany and France, concluding that, despite a lack of mail and parcels, conditions were on the whole 'generally satisfactory'.<sup>140</sup>

Aside from such outward examples of the ICRC's abilities, there was also much practical closed-door discussion in Geneva about an issue that, in marked contrast to Whitehall, the Committee understood to be of great importance: British-ICRC co-operation on a diplomatic level. Upon being informed of the changes in Whitehall's POW administration, the ICRC leadership contacted Haccius in June in order to get a general assessment of his relationship with the DPW and the PWD. As a measure of his exasperation, the usually congenial Haccius used the opportunity to implicate Warner as the

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<sup>138</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/25158 – MEW to FO, 14 February 1940.

<sup>139</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2587 – Warner to Syers, 28 June 1940.

<sup>140</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2546 – Livingston to FO, 16 July 1940; Haccius to Warner, 15 August 1940.



bane of British-ICRC relations. Not only did Haccius lament that the PWD was 'naturally inclined towards the PP', but he also spoke candidly of the 'resistance which occurs on the part of the P/W Department of the Foreign Office (Sir George Warner), towards the Committee's initiatives'. In concluding his report Haccius again singled out Warner, stressing that although his relations with the latter were 'still absolutely correct', he was still having to work around, rather than with, Warner in order to achieve anything.

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In considering the negativity of these reports it seems likely that the expeditious nature of Junod and Marti's camp inspections was as much a political move by the ICRC to prove itself to Whitehall's new POW administration as it was a humanitarian effort. The presence of Warner and his influence on the other POW departments, however, greatly minimised the impact of the ICRC's gesture. As a result, British-ICRC relations continued to be cool throughout the summer and into the autumn of 1940.

Although the British were content with the state of these relations, Haccius – in the unenviable position of intermediary – was continually concerned with the problem. As late as October 1940 he urged Geneva to respond promptly to requests for POW information in order to placate Alan Hunter, 'whose good offices are so important to me in my capacity as Delegate of the ICRC'.<sup>142</sup> Haccius' placatory attitude was not solely prompted by his own discomfort. More than anything it was a response to the generally poor condition of British-ICRC relations, which sunk to their nadir in the latter half of 1940 as Geneva and Whitehall faced the second major crisis to emerge from the

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<sup>141</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44-1 – Haccius to Geneva, 23 July 1940.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid – Haccius to Geneva, 2 October 1940.

summer – how to maintain the health and well-being of British POWs for the duration of the war.

### **THE POW CRISIS AND THE BRITISH RED CROSS**

In the First World War the British Red Cross had paid for, packed and despatched POW parcels via the General Post Office to Geneva, from where the ICRC's delegates supervised their distribution to POW camps in France and Germany. The parcels' journey to mainland Europe was by the most direct route possible, straight across the Channel via ship, and at the commencement of the second war this same procedure in parcel delivery was adopted at the request of the War Office. In the words of the BRC, 'up till the fall of France all went well' with this system.<sup>143</sup> When, however, the Channel became the effective frontline of the war in 1940, changes had to be made. The most important of these was made to the cross-Channel shipping route, which was diverted south to neutral Lisbon for onward carriage through Spain, France and ultimately to Switzerland. Owing to the breakdown in communications and transportation between Britain and the continent, however, no parcels could be shipped via this route during the first crucial weeks of the POW crisis.

The BRC and the ICRC were not totally unprepared for this situation. As early as April 1940 the two organisations had worked to create a stockpile of food and clothing parcels in Geneva. As in the case of POW reporting, however, no amount of effort by the Red Cross could overcome either the difficulties of conducting humanitarian work in times of war or the limitations imposed by its dependency on belligerents. On 15 June the Germans ordered the

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<sup>143</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.67-68; TNA:PRO WO 32/14423 – BRC Report, 5 March 1942.

suspension of mail traffic in France.<sup>144</sup> Until the resumption of the mail service on 27 July the ICRC had no means to receive or distribute the parcels. For a little over a month therefore the ICRC, despite its best efforts, was effectively helpless to bring aid to Britain's POWs.

The reactivation of the mail routes both on the continent and across the Channel brought with it further difficulties. Although a new delivery route had been established via Lisbon, the parcels' sea-borne journey from London was continually disrupted by the intensifying military situation in the skies over southern England and in the Channel. In these circumstances the laws of war offered the Red Cross little respite. Despite their humanitarian cargoes being intended for neutral Switzerland, the merchant ships transporting the BRC's parcels were not hospital ships and, as such, were not protected under the Hague Convention of 1907.<sup>145</sup> The result was that by January 1941 it was estimated that 16,296 parcels had been lost due to the attacks on such ships.<sup>146</sup> This led to the ICRC having to apply to the belligerents for safe conducts for these vessels, an action which began three years of protracted negotiations with the British authorities over ICRC shipping, the full details of which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The problems did not cease once the parcels arrived in Lisbon. From the confusion of this 'very animated centre of relief activities', the parcels had to pass through seven more inland points of transshipment on a disjointed 3,000 mile journey that the BRC regarded as 'lengthy, indirect and subject to delays

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<sup>144</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/117 – BRC Parcel Delivery Report, 20 September 1940; ICRC:G3/3B Carton 44/2 – PWD Parcel Delivery Report, 23 November 1940.

<sup>145</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.474; *Convention (X) for the Adaptation to Maritime Warfare of the Principles of the Geneva Convention* (The Hague, 1907) Articles 1-5. The Admiralty was particularly sensitive on this issue, going so far as to lodge a protest with the ICRC over the marking of two parcel-carrying vessels with the visual C .International +, rather than C. International, C.R. – ICRC:G85/1047 – S.J. Warner to Odier, 21 March 1941.

<sup>146</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44-3 – BRC Confidential Report, 24 January 1941.

and interruption, avoidable and unavoidable'.<sup>147</sup> The unavoidable factor in this evaluation was the transportation infrastructure of Spain and France, which had suffered severe damage due to recent conflicts and so proved difficult to navigate in an expeditious fashion.<sup>148</sup> What the BRC saw as controllable, however, was the standard of ICRC supervision during the transshipment of the parcels at various checkpoints and borders during the journey. Particular criticism was made of the operation in Lisbon itself, where the ICRC delegate Colonel Iselin, in addition to letting 'thousands of parcels' disappear on his watch, 'did not keep the Organisation (BRC) in London posted as to what was going on'.<sup>149</sup>

Given that the BRC's comments were part of its explanation to Whitehall as to what had gone wrong with parcel delivery in 1940, it is tempting to see these accusations as a simple shifting of blame onto Geneva. Marcel Junod, however, indicated the legitimacy of the BRC's claims in his post-war memoir, *Warrior with Weapons*. Despite the book's clear bias, Junod recalled that during the operations to Lisbon in 1940 'there was no possibility of supervision, and there was a great deal of pilfering.' So much so it seems that when Junod was informed by a proud BRC of a consignment of 36,000 parcels that had been dispatched to Geneva in September 1940, he was horrified to discover that by March 1941 only 6,000 of the parcels had actually reached their destination.<sup>150</sup>

What made this appalling rate of delivery even worse was the fact that the BRC was struggling at this time even to pack the soon to be missing parcels.

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<sup>147</sup> ICRC Report, vol.3, p.228; TNA:PRO FO 916/117 – BRC Report, 20 September 1940.

<sup>148</sup> TNA:PRO CAB 127/166 – Cripps' Report on BRC Parcel Distribution 1940-41; ICRC:G3/3B Carton 44/2 – PWD Parcel Delivery Report, 23 November 1940.

<sup>149</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/14423 – BRC Report, 5 March 1942.

<sup>150</sup> Junod, *Warrior Without Weapons*, p.175.

In addition to on-going negotiations with the Ministry of Food for assistance in procuring foodstuffs, the BRC's ability to operate in London was disrupted by Hitler's change in tactics in the first week of September, which saw the full force of the *Luftwaffe's* bombers concentrate on civilian targets in the capital. The Blitz was so destructive that in late September Lord Clarendon of the BRC proposed the wholesale liquidation of all BRC packing centres in London in order to transfer parcel packing operations to Canada, the USA and South Africa.<sup>151</sup> Thankfully, both the DPW and Clarendon's colleagues rejected this 'tragic' idea and weathered the storm of the Blitz through till November when, despite all difficulties, the BRC's parcel centres concluded their 'running-in' period and so began to operate at capacity.<sup>152</sup>

Despite the BRC's apparent victory in the battle to produce enough parcels, the means of delivering them efficiently remained elusive. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that the Geneva stockpiles that had been created in April had run dry. As early as July 1940 reports were received from inspectors at Stalag XX (Thorn) that the prisoners had just taken a delivery of eight hundred of the food parcels that had been stockpiled,<sup>153</sup> and, though seemingly impressive, this one-off delivery equated to only one parcel for every group of twenty-five men and they had to last until mid September. In late October Captain Padon at Stalag Luft IV (Gross Tychow) reported to the Protecting Power that each prisoner had received 'two parcels per head for the whole period of three and a half months'.<sup>154</sup> Two days later the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) delivered to the British its report on Stalags XX-

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<sup>151</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44-1 – Interdepartmental Meeting with ICRC London, 18 September 1940. The practice of establishing depots in the Dominions was eventually put into effect later in the war – TNA:PRO FO 916/117, BRC Parcel Delivery Report, 20 September 1940.

<sup>152</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/117 – BRC Parcel Delivery Report, 20 September 1940.

<sup>153</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2775 – PP Report on Stalag XXA, 31 July 1940.

<sup>154</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44-2 – Report of Captain Padon to American Embassy, Berlin, 20 October 1940.

A (Thorn Podgorz) and XXI-D (Posen), which had been visited by its inspectors early that month. They reported that permanent accommodation – rather than tents – was at last being used in these camps and that, in general, conditions in the camp were better than they expected. However, parcels had only started to be received in the fortnight prior to the YMCA's visit at a rate of 'one package for every two prisoners in the Stalag'.<sup>155</sup>

In early November the US Embassy in Berlin confirmed these reports to the Foreign Office, concluding that despite the best efforts of the Red Cross in collecting and packing the parcels, they were still only being received 'sporadically' in most camps.<sup>156</sup> Upon receiving these various reports the PWD made the even gloomier, though dramatically erroneous, conclusion later that month that 'no parcels could have reached the prisoners between the middle of June and the middle of September'.<sup>157</sup>

On 26 November, three days after this bleak assessment was received, Whitehall made its official response. This took the form of a speech by the Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, in which he pledged to the House of Commons that, despite all the difficulties, from now on each British prisoner of war would receive at least one food parcel per week. As Kochavi has argued, Eden's primary motivation for this bold declaration was to reassure an increasingly nervous British public that everything was being done for the prisoners.<sup>158</sup> Eden had some cause, however, to believe that his words would soon be backed up by action.

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<sup>155</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/32 – YMCA Report, 22 October 1940.

<sup>156</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/18490 – US Embassy to FO, 4 November 1940.

<sup>157</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44-2 – PWD Parcel Delivery Report, 23 November 1940.

<sup>158</sup> Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, p.20.

Despite its overall negativity, the PWD report of 23 November spoke in hopeful tones of future parcel operations now that the bedlam of the summer had subsided. For example, the report recognised the improvements to parcel delivery that would be engendered by the ICRC's phasing out of the individual parcel, a 5kg package of food or clothing that was usually packed by prisoner's relatives or National Red Cross Societies for despatch to specifically named prisoners. Prior to the fall of France, the individually marked parcel had been the primary form of parcel received by POWs, the exception being Polish prisoners, who owing to the virtual destruction of their country had few relatives or relief agencies left to pack such parcels.<sup>159</sup>

The ICRC's response to this problem in 1939 was to switch the primary form of relief for Polish POWs to collective parcels, bulk consignments of unmarked packages that were sent to the camps for distribution by the prisoner's primary representative, the Man of Confidence (MOC).<sup>160</sup> Given the similarly chaotic conditions of POW reporting in 1940, the ICRC approached the British in August with the request to switch to collective relief for British POWs, to which Whitehall acquiesced.<sup>161</sup>

The understanding and compliance of the British on this issue was indicative of another improvement that would have impressed Eden – the re-organisation in Whitehall of the means by which POW information was handled. In October modification was made to the convoluted system of receiving POW lists, which by the end of that month were being forwarded

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<sup>159</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.17, pp.202-202.

<sup>160</sup> The MOC was usually a non-commissioned officer elected by the prisoners with the approval of the camp administrators to co-ordinate the distribution of parcels and speak for all prisoners in meetings with the camp commandant and ICRC and Protecting Power inspectors – *Geneva Convention 1929*, Article 43.

<sup>161</sup> ICRC:G3/3B Carton 44/2 – PWD Parcel Delivery Report, 23 November 1940.

direct to the DPW rather than via the PWIB.<sup>162</sup> Despite this improvement, POW reporting was still slow from the German side, particularly with regard to those British soldiers captured in Belgium, whose details were not received until early 1941.<sup>163</sup> However, given that lists were at last being received and information on the number of POWs was being forwarded with greater regularity by the US Embassy in Berlin, the British and the ICRC both had reason to look upon the situation with cautious optimism.<sup>164</sup>

In terms of parcel delivery, there was also cause for renewed confidence. The BRC was doing its part to improve the problems of the summer, particularly in regards to the ever-troubled Lisbon operation. Having grown tired of despatching parcels that failed to reach their intended destination, the BRC sent its General Secretary, Judith Jackson, to Portugal to meet Colonel Iselin in order to discuss ways of rectifying the overland route problems.

The outcome of Jackson's visit and subsequent meetings with the DPW was one of the better examples of collaboration between the BRC, the ICRC and the British government. With the consent of the Germans, the decision was made to begin a feeder service by ship from Lisbon to Marseilles, where the ICRC would establish a parcel warehouse and supervise the shorter journey north to Geneva. Though the Admiralty still favoured resuming the perilous cross-Channel service, the PWD, DPW and Churchill himself backed the Marseilles option.<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, once this approval was given, the Ministry

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<sup>162</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44-2 – Satow to Haccius, 16 October 1940.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid– Hunter to Haccius, 21 September 1940; PWD Parcel Delivery Report, 23 November 1940; TNA:PRO FO 916/133 – US Embassy to FO, 3 January 1941.

<sup>164</sup> By mid-October the US inspectors had confirmed that 37,050 British POWs had been taken captive – TNA:PRO FO 916/2576 – US Embassy Berlin to US Embassy London, 15 October 1940.

<sup>165</sup> TNA:PRO PREM 4/98/1 – Interdepartmental Meeting, 21 November 1940; TNA:PRO FO 916/45 – Churchill to Herschel Johnson, 22 February 1941.



of Transport agreed to pay three- quarters of the cost of the feeder ships, the first of which, the *Juleta*, sailed from Lisbon on 22 December.<sup>166</sup>

The willingness on the part of the British to co-operate with the ICRC towards the end of 1940 sits in contrast to the reservations of the summer. The primary reason for this new found keenness was the stabilisation of the POW situation and the subsequent realisation amongst many in Whitehall that both the ICRC and the BRC were going to be needed to supply parcels for the long term benefit of British POWs. As was typical of British-ICRC wartime relations, however, this harmony was short lived.

As public knowledge of the POW crisis grew during November criticism of the British government, the ICRC and the BRC began to intensify. Against this wave of scrutiny the aforementioned parties fragmented rather than formed a unified front and in doing so, undid much of the good work that was being done for the benefit of POWs during the autumn of 1940.

The public and parliamentary outcry over POW welfare that swept Britain in the winter of 1940/41 has been well documented by historians. David Rolf's conclusion – that Whitehall was more concerned with deflecting the criticism away from itself and towards the BRC and ICRC, than actually dealing with the source of the problem – has been generally accepted.<sup>167</sup> My intention is not reiterate this appropriate conclusion, but to examine British-ICRC relations in the context of the turbulent and antagonistic environment that prevailed in Britain at this time. The key to understanding how such an environment was formed lies in the role played by the British Red Cross.

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<sup>166</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.228; ICRC:G3/3B Carton 44/2 – PWD Parcel Delivery Report, 23 November 1940.

<sup>167</sup> See generally Rolf 'Blind Bureaucracy'. For confirmation of this viewpoint see Nichol and Rennell, *Last Escape*, pp.38-39; Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, pp.18-26.

From the outset the BRC was identified by the public as the culprits in the POW crisis. The scandal began in November 1940 when the mother of A.H.S Coombe-Tennant, a captain in the Welsh Guards being held at the dilapidated Oflag VIB (Warburg),<sup>168</sup> wrote personally to Clementine Churchill asking why the government had chosen to place the fate of British POWs like her son in the hands of the evidently incompetent BRC.<sup>169</sup> Coombe-Tennant's sentiments were also reflected in Parliament, where the Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the War Office, Sir James Grigg, was questioned over matters of POW rations and the lack of reporting from mid October onwards.

Grigg's responses, particularly his admission of 5 November that 44,000 prisoners – rather than the commonly accepted figure of 37,000 – were being held in Germany, spilled over into the press.<sup>170</sup> On 24 November the *Sunday Express* ran the headline 'Scandal of our men in Germany' which was followed on 8 December by another abrasive attack on the government for the fact that 'no adequate arrangements had been made in Britain to pack and despatch parcels of food and clothing for 44,000 prisoners. The government left everything to the Red Cross.' Not surprisingly Grigg minuted on 26 November that 'there might be a very considerable scandal brewing'.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Although intended to house officers, the camp was little more than a collection of brick huts and barbed wire that suffered from overcrowding and poor sanitation for the duration of the war – MacKenzie, *Colditz Myth*, pp.98-99.

<sup>169</sup> TNA:PRO PREM 4/98/1 – Coombe-Tennant to Clementine Churchill, 20 November 1940.

<sup>170</sup> According to the OKW's records there were in fact 37,693 British POWs held by the Germans in September 1940. This figure was increased to 39,956 by January 1941 – Vourkoutiotis, *POWs and OKW*, p.35.

<sup>171</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2579 – Parliamentary Questions, Knox to Grigg, 15 October 1940; Morgan to Grigg, 5 November 1940; TNA:PRO PREM 4/98/1 - *Sunday Express*, 8 December 1940. See also Rolf, 'Blind Bureaucracy', pp.50-51.

Eden's "one parcel per man, per week" pledge did little to still the criticism. On 10 December Alfred Knox MP cornered Eden on the question of overcrowding and lack of parcel delivery to Oflag VII, asking the Foreign Secretary if he realised that 'many of the men are now living in the clothes in which they were captured'.<sup>172</sup> This question was compounded by a report from an inmate of Oflag VII, Brigadier Nicholson, stating that no parcels had been received from the BRC since August.<sup>173</sup>

Nicholson's claim was bogus, yet its acceptance by the public and, indeed, parliamentary critics, was indicative of the alarmist atmosphere in Britain at the time. In criticising the BRC's efforts, Nicholson failed to consider that the 2,298 parcels marked "ICRC" that had been received had, in fact, originated at the BRC's packing centres in London. This was a common misconception amongst POWs once the switch had been made from individual to collective parcel shipments, and the misunderstanding led many prisoners to conclude that the BRC had abandoned them.<sup>174</sup>

When this negative impression of the BRC filtered back home through POW letters Coombe-Tennant used them to fan the flames of public discontent, writing on 4 January that 'there is a strong case for not leaving the fate of 44,000 prisoners in the hands of an outside body whose failure is patent and over whom the government claims to have no control'.<sup>175</sup> This statement was echoed in Parliament by Garro Jones MP, who enquired of the Secretary of State for War, David Margesson, as to whether the latter intended to 'take steps to ensure that the staff of the Red Cross from top to bottom is re-

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<sup>172</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2577 – Parliamentary Questions, Knox to Eden, 10 December 1940.

<sup>173</sup> TNA:PRO PREM 4/98/1 – Coombe-Tennant to Clementine Churchill, 20 November 1940.

<sup>174</sup> *BRC Report*, vol.1, pp.328-329, TNA:PRO FO 916/2577 – WO Minute, 3 January 1941.

<sup>175</sup> TNA:PRO PREM 4/98/1 – Coombe-Tennant Report, 4 January 1941.

organised to include people who have knowledge of business affairs rather than amateurs'.<sup>176</sup>

This question is revealing on two levels. Not only does its confrontational nature suggest exasperation at the failures of the BRC, but the presumption that a cabinet minister had the authority to re-arrange the composition of a neutral non-governmental body indicates that there were some in Parliament – most of the critics in fact – who grossly misinterpreted the BRC's relationship to the British government and, indeed, its level of culpability in the POW crisis.

A common misconception amongst critics was the extent of information to which the BRC was privy. Alfred Knox, for example, claimed that from August to October the BRC had been despatching parcels at a rate insufficient to cater for the 44,000 British POWs, a claim that rested on the faulty premise that the BRC actually knew the total number of prisoners before it was first revealed to the public in early November.<sup>177</sup> Another erroneous view centred around the actual role of the BRC in the parcel delivery system, which was understood to be more wide-reaching than it really was. Few critics realised, for example, that the BRC's primary duty in the distribution of relief to POWs was simply receiving goods and packing them into parcels – a task which it performed to the best of its ability given the circumstances.

Although transport on the continent was a BRC concern, its influence on the efficiency of the transport system, or lack thereof, was minimal. The duty of planning and supervising the route fell to the ICRC, whilst the actual

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<sup>176</sup> Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, p.18, 24 citing Hansard, Commons, vol.368, pp.777-79, 5 February 1941.

<sup>177</sup> *BRC Report*, vol.1, p.334.

despatching of the parcels was the task of the Post Office, a fact that was not publicly admitted by the British government until January 1941. As Rolf has argued, the reason for this was that in late 1940, at the height of public criticism, the British were happy to have the BRC and the ICRC portrayed as the hapless architects of the disaster.<sup>178</sup>

For its part the ICRC knew that such criticism was likely from a very early stage in the crisis. As early as July Haccius was hard at work making efforts to re-assure public opinion in Britain that the ICRC was not responsible for Whitehall's clumsy POW policies. This act of public relations by the Committee was complementary, rather than central, to the ICRC's strategy for handling the POW crisis – a strategy that was built from the notion that the best way to temper public opinion was actually to *do* something practical to address the complaints over POW welfare. Accordingly, Haccius advised Geneva to continue pressing the Ministry of Economic Warfare for concessions to the economic blockade in order to allow a greater quantity of collective parcels to be despatched from Switzerland to the camps.<sup>179</sup> As detailed above, the problem with this strategy was that its success depended on the lines of communication and parcel transportation being efficient – an unrealistic prospect for most of 1940. The ICRC's response to the crisis, though noble, was undoubtedly more wishful than practical. As such, it did not take long for the Committee to be dragged into the scandal.

The public's misunderstanding of Geneva's relationship to the BRC – a misunderstanding that was encouraged by Whitehall – implicated the ICRC. However, owing to the Committee's physical distance from Britain, it was the

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid, pp.333-335; Rolf, 'Blind Bureaucracy', pp.51-52.

<sup>179</sup> The details of the ICRC's scheme were not officially approved by the MEW until December 1940 – ICRC:G3/3B/44-2 – Haccius to ICRC, 22 July 1940; ICRC:G85/1047 – ICRC to MEW, 5 December 1940.

London-based BRC that bore the brunt of the criticism. This is evidenced by the fact that it was not until Marcel Junod and another senior ICRC delegate, Lucie Odier, visited London in April 1941, that the ICRC specifically was targeted for criticism. So threatening was this criticism that the presence of Odier and Junod in Britain had to be kept secret from the press for fear of re-igniting public anger on the issue.<sup>180</sup>

Without the benefit of geographical separation, the BRC stood firmly in the public's firing line as the new year began. Mindful of the public's need to actually see something done on the POW issue and also, perhaps, of Garro Jones' suggestion in December that the BRC be re-organised, in January 1941 David Margesson proposed to Sir Philip Chetwode at the BRC that a managing director for the Red Cross' POW division be appointed from outside the organisation. The candidate put forward was Stanley Adams, Chairman of Thomas Cook and Son travel agents and, purportedly, an expert on all continental transportation matters.<sup>181</sup>

As stated above, the idea that the British government had a right to interfere in the administration of the Red Cross was dubious – even the Foreign Office itself admitted that 'the British Red Cross is an organisation independent of all government control'.<sup>182</sup> The BRC held staunchly to this view and as early as August 1940 Odier, upon meeting with the BRC, had observed that 'the British Red Cross fears interventions of the FO in Red Cross matters'.<sup>183</sup> The British government's allocation of blame for the POW fiasco did little to quell these

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<sup>180</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/112 – FO Report on Odier and Junod Visit, 7 April 1941.

<sup>181</sup> Adams had initially been asked to simply do a report on the BRC's procedures, but, having completed his recommendations in late January, was assigned full-time to the BRC as an administrator – TNA:PRO WO 32/14423 – Adams to Cripps, 10 March 1942.

<sup>182</sup> TNA:PRO PREM 4/98/1 – Interdepartmental Memo on BRC, 1 January 1941.

<sup>183</sup> ICRC:G3/22/80 – Odier Report on visit to London July-August 1940, undated.

fears, even when the idea of complying with Whitehall's wishes held the possibility of helping the BRC's image. When, for example, the BRC was instructed in November to run all POW information by the DPW before releasing it to the public – the aim being to ensure both parties had their facts in order – Chetwode stubbornly replied that 'we must and will publish what we like, provided the censor passes it in the ordinary manner'.<sup>184</sup>

It is a measure of the severity of the BRC's publicity problems that this defiance subsided when presented with the Stanley Adams option two months later. From the outset, however, it was clear that some in the BRC still resented Adams' appointment and regarded it as evidence of both Whitehall's lack of confidence in, and desire to control, the Red Cross. These reservations were exacerbated at the first meeting between Adams and the BRC leadership. Adams demanded that funds be injected from BRC coffers to Thomas Cook travel and that he should be given 'complete control of the Prisoners of War Department'. Both requests were denied.<sup>185</sup>

Contributing to the feeling of resentment amongst the BRC leadership was the fact that by the time of Adams' official appointment on 26 January they believed that they had been able to bring the parcel situation under some measure of control. The BRC's 1942 report stated that 'Mr. Adams took over once the back of the main difficulties had been broken, and parcels had begun to arrive regularly by the new sea route'. That being the case, 'his main activity was expediting arrangements already instituted'.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> TNA:PRO WO 258/14 – Chetwode to Grigg, 13 November 1940.

<sup>185</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/14423 – Stanley Adams' Terms of Appointment, 26 January 1941.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid – BRC Report on Parcel Delivery, 5 March 1942.

The BRC can be forgiven for being so defensive. Although far from perfect, the parcel system was indeed enjoying improvements at the time of Adams' appointment, thanks in no small part to the ICRC's newly opened Lisbon-Marseilles line.<sup>187</sup> Moreover, the BRC leadership had certainly acquitted itself as best it could under difficult circumstances. It had chosen to stay in London and organise the packing centres rather than relocate during the height of the Blitz. It had sent Judith Jackson to Portugal to liaise with the ICRC on the matter of security and transport in Lisbon and yet it was the BRC that, owing to the manoeuvring of the British government, shouldered much of the blame for the parcel problem in the eyes of the public.

This allocation of blame became even more unreasonable once Adams took up his post and, as even the BRC had to admit, began to enjoy success in his policy of improving both the sources of supply and stockpiles of parcels in Geneva.<sup>188</sup> By the end of 1941, however, the problems over jurisdiction within the Society's leadership had escalated and Adams, who was 'conscious of the manner in which my authority is being whittled down', resigned from his post on 10 February 1942.<sup>189</sup> A month later the Lord Privy Seal Sir Stafford Cripps launched an official inquiry into Adams' tenure, which largely confirmed the BRC's conclusion in early 1941 that by

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<sup>187</sup> The Lisbon-Marseilles line was in a state of improvement throughout the early months of 1941 as the ICRC attempted to clear the backlog of parcels held up since the autumn of 1940. One of the biggest success was that of the timely arrival of a large consignment of parcels in January 1941, which helped boost Geneva's rapidly depleting stockpile of 20,000 parcels. As the line improved, Adams was able to further increase this stockpile to 300,000 by June of that year – *BRC Report*, vol.1, p.262.

<sup>188</sup> The BRC admitted that Adams had 'intensified the policy of obtaining food supplies from Canada' and 'employed more commercial firms to increase the output' of the parcel stockpile in Geneva – TNA:PRO WO 32/14423 – BRC Report on Parcel Delivery, 5 March 1942. On Adams' advice Lord Clarendon also wrote to the Swiss Federal Railways asking them to inspect their transport system in order to assess any problems with the on-carriage of parcels, to which the Swiss agreed to send a representative with engineering knowledge to the Swiss/French border – TNA:PRO FO 916/32 – Lord Clarendon to Swiss Federal Railways, 28 January 1941.

<sup>189</sup> TNA:PRO CAB 127/168 – Adams to Cripps, 6 March 1942; TNA:PRO WO 32/14423 – Adams to Howard-Vyse, 22 January 1942; Adams to Chetwode, 10 February 1942.



the time Adams was appointed it had the situation well in hand.<sup>190</sup> The question therefore presents itself, why did the British government insist on Adams' appointment?

Ostensibly, the answer to this question is obvious: the appointment of Adams was designed to make both the BRC and Whitehall appear to the public as active and organised in dealing with the POW problem. But if parcel delivery was already improving prior to Adams' appointment, why did the British not make this knowledge public? The answer lies in the British government's failure in early 1941 to gauge the extent to which both the BRC and the ICRC were working to improve the situation. In part this lack of appreciation was due to mistrust, forged in the finger-pointing environment that had been created by the public's scrutiny. Aside from this, however, Whitehall's ignorance was born of more practical problems, namely the bureaucratic quagmire that had been formed over the course of 1940 between the ICRC, the BRC and the British government.

Although POW information had at last started to flow into Britain in early 1941, its rate of receipt was inconsistent and the channels of communication, through which it was transferred and analysed, hopelessly muddled. Regarding the former issue, the problem lay in the fact that the information that should have been received systematically during the autumn of 1940 was instead reaching London months later in a confusing mess of POW lists, camp names and inspection reports. Although the disruptions to continental communications were in part to blame for this, the Germans also contributed to the problem by being less than forthcoming in fleshing out the snippets of information that were received, particularly on matters of great importance such as prisoner and camp names.

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<sup>190</sup> TNA:PRO CAB 127/166 – Cripps Report on Stanley Adams, undated.

A prime example of this problem can be seen in the British attempts to clarify such basic information as the numbers and names of those captured in Belgium and France in June 1940. In December the Foreign Office pressed the US Embassy in Berlin to take the matter up with the Germans, yet, despite assurances from the OKW that the information would be communicated on 'the first of the new year', the issue dragged on until March.<sup>191</sup> When answers *were* given to queries over those captured, they often spawned new and more pertinent questions. Along with the names of those transferred to permanent Stalags, there came a compilation of prisoner accounts detailing mistreatment during the marches to the Dulags during the summer of 1940. When these accounts were finally received by the Foreign Office in early 1941 it appealed to the German government for an investigation into the issue, to which Berlin was able to reply with some conviction that too much time had elapsed since the date of the offences for a thorough investigation to be carried out.<sup>192</sup>

In the face of this obfuscation the British government's appetite for clarification, both for themselves and perhaps more importantly for the benefit of its disgruntled public, grew. So desperate was Whitehall that Halifax even suggested the quite unrealistic measure that the Protecting Power should increase its rate of inspections to once a week.<sup>193</sup> This request was not met and so once again the ICRC's capacity to inspect camps was brought to the forefront of British considerations. It was this desire for information amidst an environment of mistrust and accusations of blame that formed the basis of British-ICRC relations in early 1941.

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<sup>191</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/133 – US Embassy to FO, 3 January 1941; FO to US Embassy, 5 March 1941.

<sup>192</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/18499 – Supplement to FO to MI9, 12 March 1941; MI9 Minute, 21 February 1941.

<sup>193</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2576 – WO to FO, 7 December 1940. In January this was amended to a request for monthly inspections – TNA:PRO FO 916/32 – WO to FO, 30 January 1941.

In theory, British reliance on the Committee should have helped relations. Past experiences had proved that the ICRC was very useful at collecting such information. It will be recalled that the ICRC's inspectors had responded swiftly and efficiently to the British request for camp inspections in July 1940. A similar situation had arisen in October when the US Embassy in Berlin conceded that 'permission for visits to places of detention of prisoners of war in Belgium had not yet been accorded either to a member of the Embassy staff or to the American consular officers at Brussels and Antwerp'.<sup>194</sup> Owing to his good relations with the Germans, however, Marcel Junod was able to gain access to certain camps and hospitals in Belgium. As a result in December Alan Hunter expressed the opinion that the ICRC was a faster channel for receiving information than the Protecting Power.<sup>195</sup>

In January 1941 this particular act of service by Junod was raised by Harold Satow at the Foreign Office when he wrote on behalf of Anthony Eden to Chenevière, praising the ICRC's energy and ability in inspecting those camps and hospitals to which the US inspectors were unable to gain access. The clear message was that the continuance of such services would be greatly appreciated.<sup>196</sup>

The ICRC was happy to oblige for two reasons. Firstly, it viewed the inspections as an opportunity to repair some of the damage done to its image over the course of the winter. Secondly, the ICRC was confident in its ability to carry out the inspections. This was owing to the fact that whilst the BRC and the British government squabbled over who was to blame for the POW

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<sup>194</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2579 – Protecting Power Report to FO, 22 October 1940.

<sup>195</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2577 – Hunter to Warner, 10 December 1940.

<sup>196</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/133 – Satow to Chenevière, 22 January 1941.

crisis, the ICRC kept itself busy trying to sort out the practical difficulties of the POW reporting problem.

In addition to pursuing the negotiations for telegram funding detailed above, in December the delegates worked to improve contact between prisoners and the outside world by obtaining agreement from the Germans for a minimum of two letters and four postcards a month for each POW.<sup>197</sup> Geneva also worked to improve its own means of collecting POW information by permanently installing four delegates in Berlin to act as camp inspectors and information gatherers. The means by which this information was analysed was also reviewed, leading the ICRC to set up a liaison staff within its Geneva headquarters in order to facilitate the dissemination of the information to the various departments. The Committee was therefore prepared, at least on paper, to meet British demands.<sup>198</sup>

There was, however, a problem. Although the system of information gathering was improving, the distribution of the information from the ICRC to Britain was still very poor. This problem began in Geneva where, despite the aforementioned improvements in the ICRC's capacity to gather information, the actual process of forwarding it to Whitehall and the BRC was still well below expectations. As Burckhardt's request to David Kelly in December and Odier's hints to Nicholls at MEW in September make clear, the ICRC's perception was that an injection of extra funds in order to 'reduce to the lowest possible minimum their administrative expenses'<sup>199</sup> would help matters. There may have been some validity to these claims, however, no

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<sup>197</sup> A new postal branch for the benefit of prisoners in the Middle East was also established in Port Said by the ICRC – *ICRC Report*, vol.1, pp.348-350.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid*, vol.1, p.144

<sup>199</sup> ICRC:G85/1047 – Odier to Nicholls, 1 September 1941; TNA:PRO FO 916/2587 – Kelly to FO, 26 December 1940.

amount of money could remedy the basic problem the ICRC faced in having to process so much information so quickly. Lists of wounded and missing in particular proved confusing to analyse, as they were received by three different methods, telegrams, air mail and regular post. As such the information would 'arrive at different intervals and their contents (would) overlap'.<sup>200</sup>

The results of this can be seen in one of the more farcical episodes of ICRC communications in May 1941 when, in response to a query from the Committee on the status of an allied airman, a puzzled BRC staffer had to point out that the information on the prisoner had originally been sent to the BRC some weeks earlier by the Central Agency in Geneva.<sup>201</sup> In terms of British-ICRC relations the effect of this problem was felt on the ground in London by Haccius, who was so frustrated by the tardiness of communications that he felt the need to nit-pick with his bosses over the inconsistency of their telegram numbering.<sup>202</sup> One can hardly blame Haccius for being on edge. Unlike the ICRC's leadership he had been in London during the POW scandal and had seen first hand the results of failure on the POW issue. Moreover, as chief liaison between Geneva and the POW departments in Whitehall, Haccius understood that both his reputation, and that of the ICRC, would come under fire if the communication problems continued.

Having launched several appeals for POW information to Geneva in December, he angrily wrote to Lucie Odier that 'after ten days the information needed to reassure public opinion is still missing' and that, as a result, 'the current

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<sup>200</sup> ICRC:G85/1047 – ICRC to London, 5 January 1941.

<sup>201</sup> ICRC:G85/1098 – J.S Warner to ICRC, 9 May 1941.

<sup>202</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44-2 – Haccius to Duchosal, 17 January 1941.

controversy has placed my position in peril'.<sup>203</sup> As we shall see this conjecture was misplaced, however, the fact remains that liaison between Whitehall and Geneva was so poor at this time that Haccius genuinely feared that his role would soon become obsolete.

Part of the reason why the British did not treat Haccius as harshly as he expected may have been that they were distracted by their own problems in handling POW information. These problems concerned individual official's knowledge, or lack thereof, of where the information was to be sent once received. As late as 1 January 1941 – over six months after the reorganisation of the British prisoner of war administration – the need was felt for a memo to be circulated in Whitehall outlining both the role of the BRC and the communication procedures between them and the PWD.<sup>204</sup>

Amazingly, even after this effort at clarification, there was still confusion over the most basic principles of disseminating information. For example, despite the PWD being designated the preferred channel of communication with the Committee as far back as the beginning of 1940, Alan Hunter still expressed annoyance at both Haccius and the PWD for passing information through this official channel without his prior consultation.<sup>205</sup> Similar confusion over jurisdiction arose when the DPW received a request from the Army Council 'to obtain information as to the methods by which the ICRC transmit and distribute supplies to British Prisoner of War Camps in Germany'. In addition to not being able to provide the answer to this basic question the DPW, rather than ask the PWD or the Committee directly, either via Haccius in London or direct cable to Geneva, instead forwarded the query to the BRC. Three days

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid – Haccius to Odier, 17 December 1940.

<sup>204</sup> TNA:PRO PREM 4/98/1 – Interdepartmental Memo on BRC, 1 January 1941.

<sup>205</sup> ICRC:G85/1047 – Dunbar to Haccius, 2 February 1940; TNA:PRO FO 916/32 – Hunter To Satow, 9 January 1941; Hunter to Warner, 25 January 1941; Satow to Hunter, 28 January 1941.

later the BRC replied that it had submitted the question to Geneva presumably because it too did not have a clear answer.<sup>206</sup>

Exacerbating this communication problem was the attitude of the BRC, which responded to the criticism it endured by becoming more demanding, territorial and, most frustratingly of all for Whitehall and the ICRC, insistent upon being involved in facets of POW welfare that were not its concern.<sup>207</sup> In the course of the farcical communications with the Army Council mentioned above, for example, the BRC also put in a request to the ICRC for the latter to organise 'for the Camp Leader in every Prison Camp to report to them twice a month, in a form provided by us, full details of the number and nature of and source of all parcels or bulk supplies that have arrived'.<sup>208</sup> Although the BRC had an interest in making sure that the parcels it despatched were received, such reporting was supposed to be handled by the Protecting Power and the DPW. By the BRC's own admission the 'Red Cross had no responsibility whatever after handing the parcels over to the Post Office'<sup>209</sup> and its attempts, in the words of George Warner, to 'rather complicate matters by asking camp captains to send separate reports to the International Committee',<sup>210</sup> only served to exacerbate pre-existing communication problems by adding needlessly to the already confusing and antagonistic environment in London.

The BRC's attitude, however, was not without a benefit for the ICRC, which by comparison was regarded by some in Whitehall as the less insufferable of the two Red Cross organisations. When for example, the BRC proposed in June 1941 to appoint a permanent member of its staff to Geneva to liaise with the

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<sup>206</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44-2 – WO to BRC, 11 January 1941; BRC to WO 14 January 1941.

<sup>207</sup> Rolf, 'Blind Bureaucracy', p.54.

<sup>208</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44-2 – BRC to WO 14 January 1941.

<sup>209</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/14423 – BRC Report on Parcel Delivery, 5 March 1942.

<sup>210</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/112 – George Warner to S.J. Warner, 26 February 1941.

ICRC on the matter of parcel distribution, Whitehall received the idea coolly. The PWD's Walter Roberts, in particular, felt that 'the British Red Cross Society have not the necessary qualifications for action generally as the channel between the government and the public on prisoner of war matters.'

<sup>211</sup> In Roberts' view the BRC was a 'pale shadow of its more brilliant rival, the ICRC' and, moreover, 'had played only a minor role in the war'.<sup>212</sup> David Kelly's reservations were of a more informed and justified variety, yet still they gave the impression that the ICRC was a preferable option. Kelly believed that the workload in Geneva was too small for the BRC to appoint a delegate and that, owing to their good relations with the ICRC, the British embassy staff could handle the task of liaison themselves.<sup>213</sup>

This is not to suggest that 1941 heralded a new chapter of acceptance of the ICRC by Whitehall. Walter Roberts was only one man amongst many ICRC critics at the Foreign Office and it is likely that David Kelly's favourable assessment of Geneva's capabilities was based more on his own personal friendship with Carl Burckhardt than any wider appreciation of the Committee as a whole.<sup>214</sup> Despite those who spoke in favour of the ICRC during the POW crisis of the summer, the public outcry and the muddled reception of the Committee's efforts to improve POW reporting over the winter still cast a shadow over British-ICRC relations.

Notably, it was the ICRC that was first to extend an olive branch once the dust of 1940 had settled. This came in the form of a proposal for a visit to

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<sup>211</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/15 – Roberts Minute, 13 June 1941.

<sup>212</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/113 – Roberts Minute, 15 October 1941.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid – Berne to FO, 31 July 1941; Kennedy to Roberts, 16 October 1941.

<sup>214</sup> Kelly had been a party to Burckhardt's peace schemes as late as July 1940 – TNA:PRO FO 371/24407 – Kelly to FO, 8 July 1940. For Burckhardt and Kelly referring to each other as 'mon cher' and 'cher ami' in official and private correspondence see ICRC:G85/1047.



London by Marcel Junod and Lucie Odier in January 1941, the purpose being to assess the problems that had arisen since the fall of France and, where possible, to find solutions and improve general relations.

It is a testament to how bad those relations were that initially the proposal itself was not welcomed by either the British government or the BRC. In the case of the latter, the manner in which it had heard about the proposed visit – ‘casually from one of our government departments’ – was enough to irritate the BRC leadership, who once again felt they were being excluded. The BRC also feared that the ICRC’s delegates would bring with them a resurgence of bad publicity for both Red Cross organisations at a time when they were getting their parcel operations and with it their image, back in order. As a consequence a warning was sent from the BRC leadership to Max Huber ‘that anyone coming to this country on behalf of your Committee should be able to answer questions on the subject of POWs’.<sup>215</sup> This was not a one-off concern for the BRC, which sought to ‘prepare answers for Parliamentary questions dealing with matters concerning the International Red Cross Committee’ in an effort once again to control events and negate public criticism.<sup>216</sup>

The British government was similarly unimpressed by the proposal for Junod and Odier’s visit and, like the BRC, feared that their guilt by association with the “incompetent” ICRC would once again give rise to criticism in the press.<sup>217</sup> Beyond the publicity issue, however, there were more complex reasons for the British reluctance – reasons that greatly highlight the level of

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<sup>215</sup> ICRC:G85/1098 – John Kennedy to Huber, 24 January 1941.

<sup>216</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/115 – BRC to WO, 14 May 1941.

<sup>217</sup> Kochavi argues that the public’s perception of the British government as being tied to the ICRC might have led certain MPs, in particular Anthony Eden, to defend the ICRC in parliament. It stands to reason that those MPs who didn’t support the ICRC would be nervous about Whitehall’s association with them – Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, p.26.

misunderstanding about the ICRC that was still prevalent in Whitehall's prisoner of war departments.

Alan Hunter, who opined to a similarly confused George Warner that his 'own reactions are much against such a visit', was still unsure as to whether, as a camp inspector, Junod's presence on British soil would infringe on the rights and responsibilities of the Protecting Power.<sup>218</sup> Moreover, Hunter used this concern to justify his anxiety over Junod's intention to visit British POW camps holding German internees. This was an unnecessary fear for, as David Kelly pointed out to the Foreign Office, Hunter's original interpretation of the ICRC proposal was both alarmist and askew. 'The Committee' wrote Kelly on 16 January, 'do not propose Dr. Junod should visit German camps in the United Kingdom. Primary object as previously reported in contact with M. Haccius who informed Committee that you are definitely out of touch owing to communication difficulties'.<sup>219</sup>

This was a very apt observation by Kelly, but Hunter, it seems, was also out of touch in other ways and his reluctance to let Junod into the British camps was completely unjustified. Although conditions in Germany may have been varied and at times dangerous for internees, camps in Britain were regarded throughout the war by the ICRC as both well run and, despite occasional lapses in the quality and quantity of food and heating, generally well maintained.<sup>220</sup> Given this, the only conclusion to draw from Hunter's

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<sup>218</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/112 – Hunter to Warner, 3 January 1941.

<sup>219</sup> Underline in original – Ibid – Berne to FO, 16 January 1941.

<sup>220</sup> Calorie intake in camps varied from 3300 to 3400 per day. There were slight indiscretions by camp authorities in 1944 over a lack of blankets and sufficient heating in some camps, but these were quickly remedied after the intervention of the ICRC - *ICRC Report*, vol.1, pp.257-58, 269. Haccius reported in 1942 that his only concern was the disappearance of food parcels, possibly pilfered by British guards – ICRC:D-EUR/GB1-26 – Haccius to Gepp, 11 April 1942. By mid 1944 the ICRC felt that the only concern for German POWs in Britain was boredom, many prisoners having their requests for boxing gloves, footballs and German language books refused by the DPW – ICRC:D-EUR/GB1-51 – ICRC London Internal Memo, 14 June 1944.

reservations was that he was either unaware of the desire of the Foreign Office to keep the ICRC active in POW camp inspections – which required reciprocal inspections to camps in Britain – or was equally unaware that conditions of British camps were such that they did not warrant his concerns. Either way Hunter, the head of the DPW, was clearly ill-informed on crucial matters pertaining to the running of his office.

Another area in which Hunter and Warner showed confusion was in their curious perception that the respective ICRC delegates in each country were somehow “attached” to the interests of the country in which they were based. Both men seemed to have viewed Junod – who was based in France and Germany – as somehow working in the interests of Berlin and so Hunter ran the idea of Junod’s visit past Military Intelligence. They cleared Junod for the visit provided that he ‘is prepared to take our decision as to where he may and may not go’. Hunter also insisted on reciprocity for Haccius whom he assumed had fallen out of favour with the Committee and so would be swapping assignments with Junod and thus taking over inspecting camps in Germany.<sup>221</sup> Not only was this another misinterpretation but, as mentioned above, reciprocity was a needless demand given that it was implicit in any such arrangement. Hunter should have, yet did not, understand this and so felt the need to make it a condition of Junod’s visit. Understandably Carl Burckhardt thought this odd and felt obliged to clarify Hunter’s many ‘misunderstandings of intentions’ to David Kelly before the visit could go ahead.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/112 – Hunter to Warner, 3 January 1941; Warner To Hunter, 13 February 1941. Warner did not even like the idea of Haccius being sent an assistant to cope with the increased workload at the London delegation – Warner To Hunter, 18 February 1941.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid – Berne to FO, 16 January 1941.

Despite Burckhardt's attempt to clarify the matter and the subsequent guarantee of reciprocity, Hunter's anxiety over Junod replacing Haccius continued to affect his interpretation of the ICRC's proposal. For Hunter, the notion of Haccius being sent back to Geneva was a 'tragedy', given that he viewed Haccius as 'an International Delegate, accredited to FO (and to DPW) for a particular purpose'.<sup>223</sup> To Hunter's evidently possessive mind, the Committee's visit would lead to him losing "his" ICRC delegate and as such he needlessly resisted the proposal. The reason for Hunter's resistance to Haccius' removal provides a telling example of how the ICRC fitted into the running of Whitehall's POW departments.

Hunter's possessiveness over Haccius was not born of affection or appreciation. His immediate concern over Junod's visit to London was that Haccius 'might have his scope limited' by the presence of a more senior ICRC delegate who, unlike Haccius, 'had the ear of the Central Council (of the ICRC)'.<sup>224</sup> Compared with such a heavyweight, Haccius was deemed by Hunter to be 'not a very live wire'<sup>225</sup> and so could be better manipulated. The importance of this perception in the winter of 1940-41 lay in the on-going contretemps between the BRC and the British government. In the midst of this dispute 'Haccius', wrote Hunter in a revealing letter to Warner, 'must not be used as a cat's-paw' of the BRC, who 'should find their own servants'.<sup>226</sup>

Such language indicates that, what Odier regarded in 1940 as a British appreciation of Haccius' 'lively intelligence'<sup>227</sup> and what Haccius saw with equal

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid – Hunter to Warner, 8 January 1941; Hunter to Warner, 3 January 1941.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid – Hunter to Warner, 3 January 1941.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid – Hunter to Warner, 21 February 1941.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid – Hunter to Warner, 8 January 1941.

<sup>227</sup> ICRC:G3/22/80 – Odier Report on July-August visit to London, undated.

naïveté as Hunter's 'necessary confidence' in his 'standing'<sup>228</sup> in London, was in fact the type of possessiveness a master might develop over a particularly acquiescent servant. A servant, moreover, who the British felt they could count on if need be in their disagreements with the BRC. This perception of Haccius stands as yet another example of how Whitehall's POW departments misinterpreted the ICRC's relationship with the British government and indeed, the nature of the delegate in their midst.

Although he was at pains to maintain cordiality in his dealings with Hunter and Warner and to uphold efficiency in his duties in London, Haccius was by no means a slave to British interests. In addition to his aforementioned criticisms of Warner and the various POW departments in the summer of 1940, Haccius also made regular reports back to Geneva which were either beyond the scope of his mandate, or, in some instances, in direct violation of British wishes. For example, when told in confidence by Hunter in October of the US inspectors' difficulties in getting into certain camps, Haccius defied the former's insistence on confidentiality and reported the intelligence immediately to Geneva, presumably to notify the Committee that its services may be required.<sup>229</sup>

More intriguingly, in October 1940 Haccius also passed on the highly irregular impression to the ICRC leadership that the British were planning a 'major aerial offensive' against Germany in late February 1941. The purpose of transmitting such sensitive information is unclear, but given that the passing of this intelligence was a one time occurrence that was appended almost as

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<sup>228</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44-3 – Haccius to ICRC, 18 February 1941.

<sup>229</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44-2 – Haccius to ICRC, 9 October 1940.

an afterthought to a lengthy report on POW matters, it is unlikely that Haccius had any sinister intentions.<sup>230</sup>

What such indiscretions indicate, however, is that Haccius was not averse to conveying “non-humanitarian” information back to Geneva. Indeed, the Haccius file at the ICRC Archives contains many telegrams and reports, particularly during the period of heightened tensions over the winter of 1940-41, which dealt specifically with the publicity issues, the impact of the ‘state of nervousness at the headquarters of the BRC’ and general diplomatic relations between himself, the BRC and the British government.<sup>231</sup> The resulting insight granted the ICRC leadership by these reports – and with it the knowledge to decide to stay out of Whitehall’s blame game with the BRC – was akin to that which governments receive from their foreign embassies. This was a peculiar practice for a supposedly non-politicised entity such as the ICRC.

It is a measure of how little Hunter understood this side of Haccius that when it became clear that the latter was not necessarily “working” for the British, Hunter responded with a blend of anger and paranoia. This situation arose in mid January when the British censor intercepted a telegram from ICRC headquarters to Haccius instructing him, again much like the Foreign Office would instruct an overseas diplomat, to maintain ‘discretion’ and to ‘sound

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<sup>230</sup> Interestingly, Haccius’ information was somewhat accurate. Hanover was bombed the day after he sent his communiqué and from early February Bomber Command began a campaign specifically targeting German oil plants – Ibid – Haccius to ICRC, 8 October 1940; Simon Read, *The Killing Skies: RAF Bomber Command at War* (Port Stroud, 2006), pp.47-48.

<sup>231</sup> For reports on the composition of the prisoner of war services in Britain see ICRC:G3/3B/44-1 – Haccius to ICRC, 29 June 1940; 14 August 1940. For report on an interview with Sir Philip Chetwode at the BRC see ICRC:G3/3B/44-2 – Haccius to ICRC, 14 January 1941. A summary marked ‘confidential’, of discussions with Hunter and Warner on Haccius’ proposed journey to Geneva can be found in ICRC:G3/3B/44-3 – Haccius to ICRC, 18 February 1941. Haccius reported on the parliamentary debates and the various opinions of British officials regarding the public criticisms in ICRC:G3/3B/44-2 – Haccius to ICRC, 28 November 1940.

out' the British over the proposed Junod visit. Incensed by this, Hunter wrote to Warner that he 'did not like the tone of the telegram from the International Red Cross to Haccius. I feel there is something behind the whole move'. What that "something" was, Hunter did not make precisely clear. He did go on, however, to suggest that it 'is not at all clear at the moment as to who is actually behind the suggestion of the International Red Cross that Dr. Junod should visit this country'.<sup>232</sup>

The wording clearly indicates that Hunter thought a third party was involved in Junod's mission. Although he didn't state as much outright, Hunter's subsequent letter to Warner a month later indicated that he suspected interference from the BRC.<sup>233</sup> The Foreign Office was similarly suspicious and Warner agreed with Hunter's assessment of BRC influence, having been informed by Harold Satow earlier that day of the Postal Censor's concerns over the BRC using the Swiss diplomatic bag – which Haccius alone was authorised to use – to send confidential correspondence direct to Geneva.<sup>234</sup>

If this were true then it would not be surprising. The BRC was as eager as Whitehall to gain as much information as possible on the numbers of parcels despatched and, moreover, the effect these parcels were having on conditions within the camps. Owing to the convoluted means of acquiring this information from the British government, the BRC sought answers either from prisoners' letters home, or directly from Geneva, which obliged by sending Stanley Adams updates on the numbers of parcels despatched and those kept in reserve during the early months of his tenure.<sup>235</sup> This indicates that in early

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<sup>232</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/112 – Hunter to Warner, 19 January 1941.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid – Hunter to Warner, 21 February 1941.

<sup>234</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/115 – Satow to Warner, 21 February 1941.

<sup>235</sup> *BRC Report*, vol.1, pp.268-270.

1941 the BRC was as loathe to co-operate with Whitehall as the latter was with it. The BRC's attitude towards the ICRC as the lesser of two evils – provided of course, that it keep out of the headlines – echoed the view of the British government.

As a testament to the damage done over the course of the previous year, however, even these apparently "good" relations with the ICRC suffered from the BRC's fear of exclusion. The ICRC's Report is, unsurprisingly, coy on this issue. Communication difficulties with the British government, for example, are briefly acknowledged only insofar as they pertain to general problems caused by the physical disintegration of continental communications and the encirclement of Switzerland in the summer of 1940.<sup>236</sup> Regarding the BRC, the report specifies no particular National Red Cross Society, yet makes plain that 'some of the National Societies were disturbed to find that, side by side with their contacts with the Committee, the ICRC was in direct and regular touch with the government of their own countries on questions of importance'.<sup>237</sup>

This was certainly true of the BRC, which in August 1941 complained to the ICRC about the Committee's habit of sending communications directly to Whitehall's POW departments, instead of via, or in addition to, the BRC. This grievance was in part born of the BRC's lack of confidence in the PWD and DPW. In the opinion of Stanley Adams, 'the organisation of these departments is such that a letter from you may be received by an individual who has no knowledge of the history and traditions of the International Red Cross Committee'.<sup>238</sup> This was a deserved criticism. However, it is clear that the primary motivation for the BRC's complaints to the Committee lay in the

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<sup>236</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, pp.139-140.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid*, vol.1, p.164.

<sup>238</sup> ICRC:D-EUR/GB1-56 – Adams to Huber, 21 August 1941.



former's ever present fear of exclusion and the need to maintain the 'prestige and independence of the Red Cross in the minds of the public', by making sure that both organisations conducted their work smoothly and efficiently. As both the ICRC and the BRC agreed, the issue boiled down to a lack 'of mutual confidence between the International Red Cross Committee and the British Red Cross'.<sup>239</sup>

Although this problem was considered by the ICRC, concerns over who received what information were, generally speaking, the BRC's own. Indeed, so onerous had the BRC's attitude become for Geneva by the end of 1941 that the Committee's president, Max Huber – who was far from confrontational – felt the need to send a lengthy repost to Stanley Adams. In addition to pointing out that extra communications with the BRC would cost money that could be better spent elsewhere, Huber also criticised Adams for the latter's implication that in favouring communications with Whitehall the ICRC was in some way breaching its own 'extremely sensitive' devotion to neutrality. Huber replied as he so often did to such accusations, by citing the ICRC's statutes, declaring that 'the International Red Cross Committee is an institution independent not only of the Swiss government and the Swiss Red Cross but also independent of other governments and institutions, including National Red Cross Societies'. Roughly translated, the Committee owed the BRC nothing and so would continue to do things its own way.<sup>240</sup>

So the squabbling continued. Moreover, it continued in the wake of Junod and Odier's eventual visit to London in April 1941, during which the issues of

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<sup>239</sup> This conclusion was made during talks between Carl Burckhardt and Sir John Kennedy at the BRC in December 1941. At this meeting it was agreed that 'subject raised by the British Red Cross direct with Committee will continue to be dealt with through that channel unless both correspondents desire to bring in a third party' – Archives of the British Red Cross Society, hereafter BRC, 775-776 – Burckhardt to Huber, 12 December 1941.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid – Huber to Adams, 31 October 1941.

inadequate communication between the relevant parties, the Foreign Office's tendency to refer matters raised by the ICRC to the Protecting Power and concerns over the 'very unfair' press campaigns against the Red Cross were all addressed.<sup>241</sup> The fact that months later debate was still ongoing over which Red Cross agency could use the diplomatic bag, the role of the BRC in the transmission of POW information and the value, or lack thereof, of the ICRC's camp reports, indicates that despite the niceties of the visit, little was achieved in improving the working relationship of the British and the ICRC.<sup>242</sup>

The legacy of unpreparedness and the subsequent failures of 1940 left a blemish on British-ICRC relations that did not fade easily. The military events that followed the visit of Junod and Odier in spring 1941, however, provided an opportunity to repair some of the damage. Although the problems of poor communication and the habitual misunderstanding of intentions continued to shadow British-ICRC relations, the efforts of both parties and of the BRC during the subsequent POW crisis in Greece and Crete over the summer of 1941, shows that some progress, however slight, had been made.

### **LESSONS LEARNED IN "UNHAPPY ARCADIA"**

Much like the situation in France in 1940, the capitulation of Greece to the Axis in April 1941 brought with it the bulk capture of a large number of British and Commonwealth POWs. Although not as vast a number of prisoners as that taken in Western Europe, the Axis armies did capture 11,000 prisoners

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<sup>241</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/112 – FO Report to Churchill on visit of Odier and Junod, 7 April 1941.

<sup>242</sup> For the issue of the diplomatic bag see TNA:PRO FO 916/115 – Roberts to Burckhardt, 26 November 1941. For BRC's role see TNA:PRO FO 916/15 – Roberts Minute, 13 June 1941; ICRC:D/EUR/GB1-56 – Memorandum on BRC/ICRC/HMG relations, August 1941. For criticism of ICRC camp reports see TNA:PRO FO 916/32 – Satow Minute, 17 July 1941; TNA:PRO FO 916/45 – DPW and PWD Memo, 9 December 1941.

during the fall of mainland Greece and an additional 12,000 during the subsequent Battle for Crete.<sup>243</sup>

While the numbers were comparatively smaller, the captured endured similar conditions to those the 1940 prisoners had faced. There were forced marches and uncomfortable cattle truck rides through the dusty heat of summer to either the northern Dulag at Salonika – a converted Greek army barracks designated Dulag 185 – or the southern facility at Corinth, Frontstalag 183. Both transit camps were appalling both in their construction and administration, harbouring the usual cocktail of lice, dysentery, poor sanitation and starvation rations. In the other, smaller camps, in Crete these conditions were exacerbated by the lack of medical supplies and food rations which led to increased instances of infection, dysentery and jaundice amongst the wounded prisoners held there.<sup>244</sup>

The physical problems in the Dulags were further compounded by the lethargic forwarding of POW information by the camp administrators. So bad was the reporting that as late as November 1941 the ICRC was still waiting on capture cards for prisoners who, by that time, had been transferred out of Greece to permanent camps in Germany.<sup>245</sup> This problem started in Greece itself, where the handling of POW camps and hospitals was habitually mismanaged by the Italians, which took over the lion's share of guard duties from the more organised, more ruthless, *Wehrmacht* troops shortly after the Allies' capitulation.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/214 – ICRC to ICRC London, 11 July 1941.

<sup>244</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/18489 – Kelly to FO, 23 December 1941; Adrian Gilbert, *POW: Allied Prisoners of War in Europe 1939-1945* (London, 2006), p.47.

<sup>245</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/2 – DPW to PWD – 25 November 1941.

<sup>246</sup> The peculiar indolence of the Italian camp authorities is noted throughout the ICRC's Report. This was not unique to the occupation forces in Greece, for in some of the camps in Italy itself the forwarding of capture cards did not occur until April 1943 – Matthew Willingham, *Perilous*

Aside from their laziness, the camp authorities were also callous administrators. This attitude was more than likely a continuation of the nature of the intensity of the conflict in Greece, which affected not only the armed forces but also the staff of the Greek Red Cross, whose hospitals at Larissa and Jannia were bombed by the Italians at the close of the fighting in May.<sup>247</sup> In such a brutal atmosphere the rumours which circulated during the Battle for Crete, that Commonwealth soldiers had machine-gunned several helpless German paratroopers and then left the bodies to rot, was taken at face value.<sup>248</sup> This incident, amongst others, combined with the already harsh nature of conditions in the camps resulted in several breaches of the Geneva Convention.

At Frontstalag 183, for example, it was reported that on 'several occasions' German guards would fire into the prisoner's barracks without provocation.<sup>249</sup> Similar violations took place at Dulag 185, where on more than one occasion prisoners were shot attempting to use the open trench latrines after dark.<sup>250</sup> According to one estimate, up to fourteen prisoners were killed by such 'unnecessary causes' in Dulag 185, whilst others at Salonika hospital perished as a result of sheer neglect and want of supplies.<sup>251</sup>

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*Commitments: Britain's Involvement in Greece and Crete 1940-41* (Staplehurst, 2005), p.253; *ICRC Report*, vol.2, pp.145-47; MacKenzie, *Colditz Myth*, p.78.

<sup>247</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.211.

<sup>248</sup> MacKenzie, *Colditz Myth*, pp.37-38.

<sup>249</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/424 – Account of Captain Walker, 8 August 1942.

<sup>250</sup> Charles Rollings, *Prisoner of War: Voices From Captivity During The Second World War* (St Ives, 2007), p.62, 297 citing IWM account of Private Kenneth (Kim) Stalder, Royal Army Medical Corps and IWM account of Sapper Don Lockett, Royal Engineers.

<sup>251</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/424 – C in C Mediterranean to DPW, 11 July 1942.

Although these specific accounts were first revealed in 1942, Whitehall was given much earlier indications of what the British adventure in Greece was costing its servicemen. As early as 5 May 1941 Haccius received a report from Geneva detailing the numbers of those captured and the rate at which they were expected to be transferred to permanent camps in Germany. This was followed by a second telegram on 19 May which referred to the lack of food both for the prisoners and for the entire population of Greece.<sup>252</sup>

These early communications were the first in a succession of crucial reports on the situation in Greece provided by Robert Brunel, the Committee's delegate in Athens and a man widely regarded as one of the ICRC's finest servants during the war years. Brunel's primary achievement in Greece pertained to the welfare of the civilian population and will be dealt with at length in the next chapter. For now, however, it is essential to focus on the importance of his tireless efforts on behalf of Britain's POWs and, moreover, what those efforts tell us about the various lessons learned by the British and the ICRC from the previous POW crisis in France.

The first point to make is that unlike France and Belgium, the ICRC already had a delegation present in Athens throughout the laborious Italian invasion of Greece over the winter of 1940-41. Thus, when in spring 1941 large numbers of Allied soldiers began to be taken prisoner, Brunel and his delegation were in place and able to gain information on the POW situation at a comparatively early stage.<sup>253</sup> As mentioned above, this development should

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<sup>252</sup> *BRC Report*, vol.1, p.399 – The impact of the scarcity of food in Greece on the civilian population will be addressed in the next chapter.

<sup>253</sup> In response to the Italian invasion of Greece in October 1940, Brunel was sent to Athens on 12 November. Over the winter months it became apparent that the Italian invasion of Greece was a disaster, leading to the intervention of the *Wehrmacht* in April 1941. It was only from this point that great numbers of Allied soldiers began to be taken prisoner, the majority being captured after the fall of Kalamata on 29 April – Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.492; Willingham, *Perilous Commitments*, pp.93-96.

in no way be credited to the reporting practices of the Axis occupation authorities. In theory their indolence should have made things very difficult for the ICRC, which relied on the co-operation of Berlin and more so in this instance, Rome, to forward POW information, no less than it had in France in 1940. The difference in Greece a year later was that, in the spirit of Junod and Marti's July visits to the camps in France, Brunel and those under his supervision endeavoured from the very beginning to gather the information in person rather than patiently wait for the malaise of the Axis authorities to lift.

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In order to make these "house calls" to the camps Brunel led by example, acquiring trucks from the Greek War Relief organisation to carry both parcels and inspectors, one of whom, Brunel himself, visited the Dulags at Corinth and Salonika in late May.<sup>255</sup>

This approach was mimicked by those who came after Brunel, notably André Lambert, who assumed the role of detective in following up rumours that British POWs were being tortured at the notorious Haidari concentration camp on the outskirts of Athens. Once he had located the camp Lambert parked his parcel-laden truck outside the gates and upon being refused entry, sneaked in, only to be forcibly ejected by the guards. Undeterred, he followed the prison transport trains in a Greek Red Cross truck, often pulling up alongside the carriages at stations in order to force parcels through the slits in the cattle carriage doors. It was only once the train at last out-ran him that he was informed that the prisoners were not British POWs, but Jews.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.2, p.147.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid*, vol.2, p.147; *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.185; TNA:PRO FO 916/214 – ICRC to ICRC London, 11 July 1941; ICRC:G3-27A/147 – Brunel Report, 12 September 1941.

<sup>256</sup> Haidari was established in September 1943 as a transit camp for Jews and partisans – Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation 1941-44* (New Haven, 1993), p.226; Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.396.

The seeds of such uncharacteristically forcible action on the part of the ICRC were sown in the early weeks of the occupation, when Geneva – which recognised the importance of Brunel's reports in terms of British-ICRC relations – urged action in Greece by bombarding Whitehall with as much information as possible. The first substantial quantity of information was received by the British on 13 June. The report was striking in its detail, in particular with regard to Brunel's 27 May visit to Frontstalag 183. Rather than generalised statements about the scarcity of food, gram by gram information was presented alongside lists of the limited types of food available, as well as details of the numbers of those affected by dysentery and diarrhoea following its consumption.<sup>257</sup> A further report on more general conditions throughout the POW camps and hospitals of Greece was received on 11 July and once again details, not just of the appalling conditions, but of the numbers, regiments and names of those suffering, featured throughout.<sup>258</sup> The ICRC had clearly learned from France the importance of minutiae in building a wider, more informed picture.

What the reports lacked, however, was accurate information on when the prisoners would be sent to more permanent and acceptable accommodation in Germany. This was not for want of trying, for Brunel did provide rough estimates of how many he thought had been transported and when those remaining would enjoy similar extraction.<sup>259</sup> The problem was that the actual number of those transported was often different to the estimates. This was for a number of disruptive reasons, all of which were beyond the control of the ICRC. The railway line linking Greece to Yugoslavia and, thence, to Germany

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<sup>257</sup> ICRC: G85/1047 – ICRC Cable of Brunel's Report to ICRC London, 13 June 1941.

<sup>258</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/214 – ICRC to ICRC London, 11 July 1941.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid – ICRC to ICRC London, 11 July 1941; Geneva to FO, 9 August 1941.

was primarily single gauge and large amounts of rolling stock from the Balkans had been confiscated by the Germans for their invasion of the Soviet Union. This naturally led to delays in the scheduled extractions, delays that the occupation forces neglected to inform the ICRC about.

The process of transit within Greece itself was also inefficient, owing both to the damages to roads and, paradoxically, to an act of mercy on the part of the occupation forces. This was the general practice of treating the more severely wounded prisoners in camp hospitals before sending them off on the arduous journey to their permanent camps in Germany. The problem was that the poor conditions within these hospitals, plus the lack of food, made the recovery process variable and that, combined with the generally maladroit organisation of the Axis occupation, meant that the last of the POWs captured during the April-May campaign were not removed to Germany until April 1942.<sup>260</sup>

This reality contrasted with the ICRC's hopeful prediction in July 1941 that all of the '12,000 to 13,000 British' captured in Crete would soon be transferred to Germany.<sup>261</sup> By August these optimistic figures had been revised. 10,000 POWs were reported to have been taken as far as the hellish Dulag 185 at Salonika, with 5,394 still awaiting extraction from Crete to the Greek mainland.<sup>262</sup> This estimate was again revised four days later after the next round of transfers between camps, becoming '9,500 prisoners at Salonika and 3,084 in Crete'. The latter were reported to have been transferred, no later than by September, to Frontstalag 183 at Corinth and from there on to

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<sup>260</sup> Gilbert, *POW*, p.48.

<sup>261</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/214 – ICRC to ICRC London, 11 July 1941.

<sup>262</sup> ICRC:G85/1047 – Barbey to FO, 5 August 1941.



Germany.<sup>263</sup> As infuriating as the substance of these reports were, the regularity with which they were compiled – sometimes on a daily basis – indicates that the ICRC had a far more efficient grasp on information collection and distribution than it had possessed the previous year.

The ICRC's reports on the fluidity of the prisoners' movement between camps and the apparent stability of the POW situation in Greece was received by the British with relief and optimism; relief that the situation was not as had been the case in France a year earlier and optimism that the prisoners would only be in Greece for a short time and thus could survive their unpleasant, yet brief, stay without the need for a new parcel delivery operation. Although this helped British-ICRC relations – the latter being regarded by the former as having the situation well in hand – this perception had the negative effect of leading many in Whitehall initially to view the POW situation in Greece with a certain degree of indifference.

A good example of this attitude can be found in the response to Brunel's July report on the poor quality and quantity of rations. Having received notice of the specifics of the insufficient foodstuffs, the DPW asked the PWD to 'be good enough to take the necessary steps through the diplomatic channel to *whichever Government is the Detaining Power* with a view to the immediate improvement of those rations'. Although there was evidently some concern for the rations allocated, the lack of knowledge over which Axis power was in charge indicates some detachment from events in Greece on the part of the DPW. Moreover, Captain Gilkes at the DPW added comments at the bottom of the telegram suggesting that it should wait before making representations to either Rome or Berlin about the food. The concern was that no needless

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<sup>263</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/214 – Geneva to FO, 9 August 1941.

demands should be made of the Axis via the Protecting Power, lest the effectiveness of such appeals be compromised.<sup>264</sup>

Similarly, the Foreign Office delayed giving Brunel's correspondence to the BRC, which claimed in its post-war report that it did not receive any information on the needs of those captured in Crete until 10 July. What remains unclear is whether this was owing to the poor communications that existed between Whitehall and the BRC, or the former's impression that nothing needed to be done for the transient POWs. In either case, despite what the BRC's report claims, it was not the hapless victim of the British government's machinations.

As early as June – that is prior to having supposedly been first alerted to the situation in Greece – the BRC proposed sending Edward Hogg to Ankara to act as liaison with the ICRC delegation. As Sir John Kennedy of the BRC openly acknowledged, the despatch of Hogg was part of the BRC's 'need to act when the public displayed anxiety, although it might consider such action unnecessary'. An apt observation given that Hogg returned from his dull and uneventful mission after only a week in Ankara.<sup>265</sup> Clearly, if not directly informed by the British, the BRC at least had a suspicion that the surrender of Greece could open a familiar Pandora's Box of public criticism.

Stanley Adams certainly realised that the ramifications of the Greek situation could be dire. He wrote to Sir Philip Chetwode on 15 July:

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<sup>264</sup> Italics are my emphasis. The rations reported were those issued at Frontstalag 183 in Corinth. These consisted of a daily ration of 100 grams of macaroni, 100 grams of salt fish, 25 grams of oil, 15 grams of sugar, 15 grams of honey and a small quantity of 'some substitute for bread'. – TNA:PRO FO 916/214 – DPW to PWD, 24 June 1941.

<sup>265</sup> Not long after Hogg had arrived in early August it was decided that his appointment had been an overreaction and he was not, in fact needed. He returned to Britain on 6 September 1941 – *BRC Report*, vol.1, pp.404-405.

that people will be only too happy to make a scapegoat of the Red Cross.....we cannot be too energetic in taking steps to protect the situation. We have got to take steps to safeguard ourselves from the outset: it is no good waiting until a crisis develops and then attempt to refute the allegations.<sup>266</sup>

The day after Adams' warning the BRC learned that the ICRC – perhaps acting out of a similar fear of repeating the mistakes of France – had despatched 2,000 parcels, that is, one parcel for each of the wounded prisoners in Crete.

<sup>267</sup> At around the same time, the ICRC also sent an extraordinary proposal to the British ambassador in Ankara, Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen, for approval to acquire caiques for the delegates to paddle out to the Greek islands and supply those POWs and civilians who had been cut off.

Knatchbull-Hugessen would become a great ally of the ICRC in Greece and as a measure of his evident comprehension of the gravity of the situation and the need to respond to it promptly, he advised the Foreign Office in November to approve the caique plan, even if it upset MEW's intentions to enforce its blockade regulations. By this time Whitehall's optimism over the POW situation in Greece had subsided, owing to reports of POW mistreatment in Crete that it had received in October. The Foreign Office, no doubt fearful of another public backlash, agreed to the ICRC's proposal. In one of the few notable acts of ICRC defiance during the war, when MEW made efforts some months later to have the caiques banned, Brunel responded by ignoring the order.<sup>268</sup>

These responses, in the case of all parties concerned, represented a marked improvement to the collective handling of the debacle in France. Although it

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., vol.1, pp.400-401 citing Adams to Chetwode, 15 July 1941.

<sup>267</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/214 – Geneva to FO, 16 July 1941.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid. – Ankara to FO, 8 July 1941; DPW to FO, 8 October 1941; *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.460.

can be argued that the scale of the operation in Greece was small compared to Western Europe, the same problems still existed and, moreover, still threatened the welfare of British prisoners. Motivated in no small part by concerns over bad publicity, the responses of the BRC, the ICRC and to a lesser extent, the British government, did help reduce the probability of further misery and mortality amongst British POWs in Greece. Indeed, in passing judgement on the work of the Red Cross in Greece during 1941-42, Lt. Colonel Venables of GHQ Middle East bluntly concluded that 'without these parcels many prisoners would have died from starvation'.<sup>269</sup>

For those left behind in Crete, the energetic response of the ICRC and the BRC elevated parcels to something more than life preservers. By January 1942, the handful of prisoners remaining in Crete were so satisfied with their camp conditions and parcel supplies that they told ICRC inspectors they did not want to be transported to Germany.<sup>270</sup> Mindful of the French experience the Red Cross was still cautious, however, and continued to supply Crete with parcels until mid 1942, when at last both London and Geneva accepted that they had enough parcels to handle any further influx of prisoners.<sup>271</sup> Given that military operations were still on-going in nearby North Africa, this was a notably sensible display of forethought by both Red Cross organisations – further evidence that the lessons of France had been learned.

This is not to suggest that the POW situation in Greece was devoid of problems. By the time parcels began to flow into the camps the majority of the prisoners had been moved to permanent accommodation, leading to the unfamiliar situation in late 1941 of the ICRC having too many parcels for the

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<sup>269</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/424 – C in C Mediterranean to DPW, 11 July 1942.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid. – Pictet to Haccius, 9 January 1942.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid. – Cairo to MEW, 14 May 1942; Ankara to FO, 30 June 1942.

reduced camp population of a little over 3,000 prisoners.<sup>272</sup> The breakdown in parcel delivery, however, owed more to the practices of the occupation forces and the physical damage to Greek roads than to any act of ineptitude or tardiness on the part of the Red Cross, which had realised that a forceful and independent mindset would be needed to bring succour to Greece. Robert Brunel's attitude helped greatly in this regard, but so too did the efforts of the ICRC leadership, in particular Carl Burckhardt, to help facilitate the delivery of parcels to Greece – a triumph of Red Cross innovation that will be examined in the next chapter.

The BRC, for its part, was also quick to respond to the Greek situation, having been encouraged by the stabilisation in April 1941 of its parcel operations in France, which Stanley Adams believed would continue its 'decided improvement' if, of course, it was 'subject to no political interference'.<sup>273</sup> This statement is revealing, in that it showed that for Adams and presumably for the entire BRC, a wariness of Whitehall still persisted despite the recent improvements. Ironically, in the same correspondence Adams referred to the Ministry of Economic Warfare as being 'most generous' and providing 'helpful support' to the BRC – a conclusion that, as we shall see in the next chapter, was to prove erroneous once the occupation of Greece began. If Adams was implying that it was the PWD and the DPW that would prove a hindrance – which was probably the case if one considers the critical observations he made of the two departments to Max Huber in August – then he was also mistaken.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> By November the ICRC reported that the only thing the prisoners needed was a fresh supply of underclothes – TNA:PRO FO 916/214 – Ankara to FO, 8 September 1941; Ankara to Cairo, 24 November 1941.

<sup>273</sup> TNA:PRO 837/1229 – Adams to Butler, 7 April 1941.

<sup>274</sup> ICRC:D-EUR/GB1-56 – Adams to Huber, 21 August 1941.

The response of the British government in Greece indicates that the contrary was true. Struggling to shake off the public criticism of 1940, it was the Foreign Office and in particular its head, Anthony Eden, and ambassador in Ankara, Knatchbull-Hugessen, who would prove to be the unlikely allies of the Committee during its battles to come with MEW over relief efforts for civilians. It is to this specific relationship between the British officials who wished to enforce the blockade of Europe and the ICRC delegates who campaigned constantly to have it breached, that we shall now turn.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **THE ICRC AND BRITISH ECONOMIC WARFARE**

#### **THE BLOCKADE OF FRANCE**

We have seen how a lack of communication, co-ordination and faith on the part of the British government affected relations with the ICRC during the turbulent latter half of 1940. On the predominant issue of POWs it was the Foreign Office, and more particularly the PWD, which contributed to the unease of this relationship. It would be unreasonable, however, to single out the attitudes of POW-focused officials such as George Warner and Alan Hunter, given that neither man was concerned with the other difficult sphere of relations between the British and the ICRC during the war: the conflicting objectives of Britain's policy of economic warfare and the ICRC's relief efforts on behalf of victims of war.

The duty of providing relief to civilians in addition to soldiers in times of war had long been a part of the ICRC's mandate, having been first undertaken alongside the Committee's other main task of information collecting by the Basle Agency during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-71. More widespread relief efforts on behalf of civilians interned by enemy nations and refugees were made in occupied France and Belgium during the Great War, and at the Tenth International Red Cross Convention in 1923 the concept of equal relief services for both civilians and prisoners of war was put into writing by Dr. Frédéric Ferrière, the Committee's pioneer in the field of civilian protection.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Actual protection of civilians in times of war was not, however, codified until the signing of the revised Geneva Convention 1949 – Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.84-85.

Once enshrined, the task of providing relief for civilians became an on-going concern for the Committee in the years following the Great War, with delegates active in this field in the Crimea, Turkey, Greece and Lithuania. In the lead up to the Second World War the ICRC was also busy in Western Europe, having established a small, but experienced two man operation to co-ordinate civilian relief efforts in war-torn Spain. The Relief Section's chief duties were to receive gifts or make purchases of foodstuffs, medicaments and general supplies using financial donations from either direct contributors or National Red Cross Societies. These supplies were usually procured from and shipped via neutral countries, Switzerland being among the most convenient and common source.

As in the case of reporting for prisoners of war, the invasion of Poland provided the first test of the Second World War for this relief infrastructure, and, much like the Central Agency, the Relief Section used the experience to learn from and adapt to the challenges posed by the latest European conflict. The result was that by mid 1940 the Relief Section's wartime personnel had grown to over forty delegates and volunteers and its duties had expanded to absorb those previously assumed by non-Red Cross warehouse managers, shipping agents and contractors. In the shadow of German domination over much of Western Europe and the resulting large numbers of prisoners, both soldiers and civilians, placed into camps, by mid 1940 the Relief Section had arguably become the most important, multi-faceted and demanding branch of service within the ICRC.<sup>276</sup>

In addition to the difficulties of finding food in times of rationing and organising transport in times of war, part of what made the work of the section so demanding was that in the wake of France's fall its intentions

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<sup>276</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.273; Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.470-471.



began to intersect with those of the British who, having lost their military presence on the continent, turned to their now primary offensive weapon in the struggle against Germany – blockade.

Like the ICRC's relief duties, the British had a precedent for this action. The principle of blockade had been established in the customary laws of war by the Declaration of Paris in 1856 and subsequently codified in the Declaration of London in 1909.<sup>277</sup> Accordingly, the principle of restricting the import and export activity of an enemy nation had been implemented by the British during the First World War. In some British circles the blockade was regarded not only as being a more humane form of warfare, but also of having played a crucial role in the defeat of Germany by engendering the 'physical and moral deterioration that set in amongst the German people'.<sup>278</sup> Owing to this high regard, during the second war a blockade of Europe was seized upon early by many in Whitehall as a means of bringing Germany to its knees. Within days of the invasion of Poland the British began negotiations with continental neutrals over the issue of restricting their importation of "contraband" goods into the expanding Reich.

The main reason this form of warfare affected ICRC relief activities was that foodstuffs – the primary component of relief on behalf of both prisoners and civilians – had been defined as contraband under the Declaration of London. Although foodstuffs were not considered to be "absolute contraband", that is material that could be used by an enemy for the specific purpose of warfare, they were classified as "conditional contraband", that is, material that could

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<sup>277</sup> *Declaration Respecting Maritime Law* (Paris, 1856) point 4; *Declaration Concerning the Laws of Naval War* (London, 1909), hereafter *Declaration of London 1909*, ch.1.

<sup>278</sup> W.P. Consett, *The Triumph of Unarmed Forces: 1914-1918* (London, 1923), p.269; Best, *Humanity in Warfare*, pp.256.

be used for either peaceful or military purposes. The importance of this distinction was that according to international law, "conditional contraband" could be seized by a blockading power if the material was assumed to be used by the enemy's armed forces or government. Given the German government's absolute mastery of occupied Europe and the *Wehrmacht's* role as occupying power and administrator, foodstuffs intended for the occupied territories could justifiably and legally be seized or restricted for importation by the British.<sup>279</sup> This practice was deemed essential by Whitehall to a successful blockade of Europe.

The task of enforcing the blockade fell to the Ministry of Economic Warfare (MEW), a branch of the Foreign Office that one early employee recalled as a 'bewildering organisation' of 'many deluded optimists'.<sup>280</sup> This gloomy early assessment of the value of economic warfare was given some credence during the winter of 1939-40, when Berlin took effective measures to counter British attempts to deprive it of supplies, leading to a wave of parliamentary and public criticism aimed at MEW.<sup>281</sup> The criticism was compounded by the change in conditions after the fall of France later that year, which suddenly made the struggling Ministry's work a key component in Britain's ability to continue to wage war. With its mandate now more important than ever, MEW took steps in the summer of 1940, in the words of its hard line chief Hugh Dalton, to become 'much more combative, more true to its name'.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> *Declaration of London* 1909, Articles 24, 35.

<sup>280</sup> John Colville, *Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries 1939-1955*, (London, 2005), p.3. Shortly after writing this Colville made a successful request for re-assignment to the Eastern Department of the Foreign Office, before becoming private secretary to Chamberlain and then to Churchill.

<sup>281</sup> W.N. Medlicott, *The Economic Blockade*, 2 vols. (London, 1959), vol.1, p.48.

<sup>282</sup> Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years: Memoirs 1931-1945* (London, 1957), p.334.

The first major step in this direction was a revision of the existing navicert system of control. The navicert, a document issued at the discretion of the British government granting permission to merchant vessels to import goods, was first introduced on 1 December 1939, and was used as a means of regulating the quantity and type of goods that could be received into neutral European ports. This system of control was tightened on 31 July 1940 by the creation of a compulsory navicert, which now had to be issued before a ship left its port of loading.<sup>283</sup>

For the ICRC, 'the strictness of these stipulations took no account of humanitarian considerations' and as such created new problems for its ongoing relief activities, the first being that only neutral ports could be used for the receipt of goods into Europe.<sup>284</sup> This provision, combined with recent German conquests in Western Europe, led to the end of the Red Cross' convenient 1939 transport routes through the now occupied territories of Belgium and Holland. This left only the option of neutral Lisbon, a port that, as discussed in the previous chapter, was both unsecured and beset by shipping and rail transportation difficulties that contributed to the calamitous attempts to provide relief for British POWs.

A second, arguably more politically sensitive consequence, of the blockade regulations was the impact they had on the ICRC's ability to provide relief in the form of bulk parcels for civilian victims of war in occupied France. France was made subject to the new blockade provisions within days of its capitulation. Although this brought an end to the military conflict in that country, throughout the war's early years the unoccupied and occupied

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<sup>283</sup> Owing to their status at the time as neutrals the United States refused to give official approval for the navicert system. American ships did, however, help enforce the regulation of navicerts in the Atlantic – Medicott, *Blockade*, vol.1, p.43, 422.

<sup>284</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.370.

territories provided a political and humanitarian battleground upon which the Committee fought tirelessly against MEW.

The first clash between the ICRC and MEW over this issue was on 6 July 1940 when, in response to a request from the French Red Cross for supplies for civilian refugees, the ICRC despatched SFr75,000 worth of goods to what was by then occupied France. This action did not pass without adverse Whitehall comment. Having learnt of this displeasure, the ICRC explained itself by pointing out to the British Consul Henry Livingston that the French Red Cross' request was made prior to the capitulation of French forces and, furthermore, that compared with this one truckload of goods, 'the International Committee have already purchased goods in Switzerland worth 150,000 francs for despatch to British prisoners of war'. At least one Foreign Office official was unmoved by the explanation, scrawling at the bottom of Livingston's telegram, 'if our policy is to refuse consent to the USA sending relief to unoccupied France, we cannot agree to the International Committee sending any further relief to occupied France'.<sup>285</sup>

This response was consistent not only with MEW's blockade policy, but with the Foreign Office's general weariness of the ICRC at this time – a weariness that had been exacerbated within MEW corridors by intelligence from David Kelly in Berne suggesting that the ICRC's despatch of supplies to occupied France would be done in collusion with a local National Socialist organisation. As such, it was thought, any humanitarian goodwill earned by the British for slackening the blockade would instead be claimed by the Nazis.<sup>286</sup> This served only to reinforce the already present fear in Whitehall that Switzerland and its Red Cross would soon be forced into a closer relationship with the Reich.

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<sup>285</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1218 – Livingston to FO, 30 July 1940.

<sup>286</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1226 – Kelly to FO, 16 July 1940.

Indeed, when moves were made by the American Red Cross in August for a food relief operation in France, one of the more supportive MEW staffers tried to downplay this presumption of ICRC-Nazi collusion by noting to his superiors that the operation did not involve the Nazi-controlled German Red Cross (DRK).<sup>287</sup>

Amidst this suspicion there were, however, some officials at MEW who seemed to appreciate – more so than their colleagues at the PWD and DPW – that the ICRC was becoming increasingly valuable for the safeguarding of British prisoners and so needed to be handled with care. In discussing whether a single ARC ship should be permitted to unload supplies into France, MEW's J.W. Nichols minuted that 'if one shipment from America was allowed, I think it would be necessary to square the International Organisation first'.<sup>288</sup> Similarly Charles Stirling, a MEW official with a sympathetic view of the Axis-enclosed Swiss, offered the more amenable opinion that given the services performed by the ICRC on behalf of British POWs, the matter of ICRC activities in France should be left alone. Furthermore, he informed the Foreign Office that if a response to Geneva's explanation had to be sent, it was important to suggest 'that so far as we are aware there has been no hostile comment on the action of the International Red Cross Committee'.<sup>289</sup>

Stirling's response is revealing. Although he showed appreciation for the work done by the ICRC on Britain's behalf, it is notable that he stopped short of wanting to assure the Committee that no comment had been made at all regarding its actions in France. As was to become customary in MEW's dealings with the ICRC throughout the war, Stirling was endeavouring to

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<sup>287</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1218 – MEW Minutes, 10 August 1940.

<sup>288</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1226 – MEW Minutes 31 July 1940.

<sup>289</sup> Underline in original – Ibid. – Stirling to Steele, 6 August 1940.

reach a balance with the Committee between placation and restraint, the objective being simultaneously to preserve both Britain's POWs and the integrity of the blockade. This was an exceptionally difficult task given that for the latter objective to be accomplished restrictions had to be placed on ICRC activities. In keeping with the Committee's non-discriminatory mandate these activities included rendering assistance to British and *non*-British victims of war – including those French POWs within the blockaded areas to whom in late July the likes of George Warner objected to lending indirect financial assistance.<sup>290</sup>

What becomes apparent in examining the relations between the ICRC and MEW is that Warner's emphasis on British interests at the expense of fallen allies was shared by many in the Ministry. In the spirit of maintaining the blockade, French POWs and civilian internees were denied bulk collective parcel shipments under blockade regulations until 1942, nearly a year after the Ministry had granted similar provisions for British POWs.<sup>291</sup> Despite the precedent set by MEW's agreement of early 1940 with the ICRC on the matter of collective parcels for Polish POWs,<sup>292</sup> the notion of Vichy receiving large quantities of food for despatch to its POWs in un-occupied France and Germany was resisted by the Ministry, which still 'objected in principle to bulk shipments, the supervision of which they considered more difficult than that of standard parcels'.<sup>293</sup> This objection addressed the two main concerns of the British in regards to supplying France: firstly, the need for stringent supervision in the distribution of goods in German-held, or German-affiliated

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<sup>290</sup> See ch.1, pp.45-46.

<sup>291</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.205. For details of negotiations see International Committee of the Red Cross, *Report of the Joint Relief Commission of the International Red Cross: 1941-46* (Geneva, 1948), hereafter *JRC Report*, pp.14-16.

<sup>292</sup> See chapter 1, p.59

<sup>293</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.30.

territory; and, secondly, the opinion of MEW that France was self-sustainable in terms of foodstuffs and, thus, was not in need of imported supplies for its civilian population.<sup>294</sup>

Regarding the latter argument, it is true that some French civilians in the countryside were able to procure luxuries such as fresh vegetables, cheese and meat from local farms. For those living in the cities, however, instances of malnutrition, tuberculosis and generally poor health rose significantly over the years of occupation due to small and nutritionally defective rations. Although these varying experiences of city and countryside make generalisations hazardous, it has been estimated that the average French civilian consumed somewhere between 1,200 and 1,500 calories a day during the occupation period – a rate of consumption lower than anywhere else in Western Europe, with the exception of Italy. Adding to this problem were the German occupation practices. These were defined by the billeting of soldiers where and when they pleased; the creation of an unfair rate of exchange between the Reichsmark and the Franc; and the requisitioning of goods ranging from eggs and bread, to fuel and tobacco.<sup>295</sup>

The British were aware of these practices and in late 1940 the Ministry received reports confirming fears that in addition to the usual plunder, contraband goods that had been entering the country via the Vichy port of Marseilles were being seized by the Germans and Italians. This was an issue of particular sensitivity for MEW, which had been harassing the Admiralty since July to tighten the blockade around southern France. This embarrassing

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<sup>294</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1226 – MEW Memo, 3 August 1940.

<sup>295</sup> The rate of exchange was one Mark to twenty Francs, a distortion of economics that inflated the wealth of the average *Wehrmacht* soldier to the point where purchases amounted to a form of legalised plunder – Ian Ousby, *Occupation: The Ordeal of France, 1940-1944* (London, 1999), pp.118-126; Phillipe Burrin, *France Under The Germans: Collaboration and Compromise* (New York, 1996), pp.196-198.

“Marseilles Leak” comprised an estimated 80,146 tonnes of foodstuffs that had been shipped from the French colonies into the unoccupied territory at a time when MEW was attempting to display the strength of its new blockade programme.<sup>296</sup> It is against this background of deteriorating conditions in the occupied territories and the blockade’s failure around Vichy that the ICRC’s efforts to bring relief to France must be considered.

Having received reports of food shortages from camp inspectors on the ground over the summer of 1940, the cause of the French was taken up by Lucie Odier, one of the ICRC’s most compassionate and emotionally driven delegates. Despite her experience with the Committee’s relief activities during the First World War and her administrative duties in Geneva during the Italo-Ethiopian War and the civil conflict in Spain, her relative lack of experience in diplomacy meant that she was a poor choice as negotiator for such a delicately political assignment.<sup>297</sup>

Impassioned yet courteous, demanding and yet submissive, so much of Odier’s correspondence with the British reads more like cries for help than authoritative requests, at times not dissimilar in tone and language to the manifold pleas from the mothers of British prisoners of war that flooded Whitehall in late 1940. Even Marcel Junod, who seems to have admired Odier, had to concede that ‘her appearance and her voice lent something truly

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<sup>296</sup> This figure of foodstuffs received into Marseilles covers the period July-September 1940 – Medlicott, *Blockade*, vol.1, pp.562-564. Dalton was particularly aggrieved that the British Navy showed reluctance to challenge the vastly inferior Vichy escort vessels. With Churchill’s support the interception of Vichy vessels began in November 1940, however the Admiralty were still reluctant to risk a full-scale engagement with Vichy over the issue – Dalton, *Fateful Years*, pp.354-356.

<sup>297</sup> A nurse by trade, Odier spent most of her post-First World War career confined to administrative and co-ordination duties at the ICRC, first as a member of the Ethiopia Commission and, during the Spanish Civil War as a member of the Commission for Spanish Affairs. In both conflicts she assumed the role of relief co-ordinator and head of the nursing staff – Baudendistel, *Bombs and Good Intentions*, pp.28-29; Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.321.



pathetic to all she did'.<sup>298</sup> Rudolph Haccius also found cause to question whether her amateur style of 'haggling' with the British would undermine his efforts to build 'goodwill' in London. This rumination seemed justified given that at least one MEW staffer noted in 1941 that Odier's latest proposal for slackening the blockade was 'a rather confused account' compared with the concise presentation of a similar request made by the Committee's more politically astute vice-president, Carl Burckhardt.<sup>299</sup>

As an example of the differing viewpoints held by the British and the ICRC on the matter of relief, Odier's negotiations with MEW provide crucial insight. Her first request of 2 August, for example, was a general appeal for a relaxation of the blockade with the intention of shipping medicines and food into occupied France for the benefit of civilian refugees. Although she graphically outlined the plight of these civilians and listed the various contributions made by several National Societies in response to the ICRC's appeals, Odier made only a passing reference to MEW's requirements for guaranteed security against seizure by the enemy of supplies passing through the blockade. In misplacing this emphasis Odier omitted any concrete plans the ICRC had for such supervision, a matter that both the Vichy situation, MEW minutes of the period and correspondence between the ICRC and MEW over POW parcels reveal was clearly the primary concern of the Ministry.<sup>300</sup>

Not surprisingly, the unanswered question of just how the ICRC would ensure that the supplies did not fall into enemy hands formed the basis of MEW's refusal of collective relief and when it at last replied to Odier – nearly a month

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<sup>298</sup> Junod, *Warrior Without Weapons*, p.177.

<sup>299</sup> ICRC:G3/3B/44-2 – Haccius to Odier, 17 December 1940; TNA:PRO FO 837/1220 – MEW to FO, 28 January 1941.

<sup>300</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1218 – Odier to MEW, 2 August 1940; MEW Minutes, 10 August 1940; ICRC:G85/1047 – Odier to MEW, 9 August 1940.

after her appeal – the Ministry bluntly stated that it did 'not believe that any safeguards can be devised'. As such it was decreed that France would remain blockaded, the only concession being shipments of medical supplies for those who had been identified by camp inspectors as sick or wounded. Even this concession was flawed in practice, since the British would often alter the list of authorised products with little notice. This meant that many of the supposedly acceptable medical shipments became the subject of time-consuming negotiations with MEW on a consignment by consignment basis.<sup>301</sup>

These regulations, as well as those designed to restrict large imports of foodstuffs, both to POWs and to civilians, were in line with the British government's official policy, which was made public by Winston Churchill when he declared to the House of Commons on 20 August that the British would refuse all requests for relief to be sent to any territory occupied by the Germans. It was Hitler, Churchill reasoned, who had the responsibility to feed the civilians of his newly conquered territories and, as such, the British would countenance only the stockpiling of relief in expectation of military victory. The peoples of Europe, whether starving or diseased, would simply have to wait for the 'shattering of Nazi power that will bring them all immediate food, freedom and peace'.<sup>302</sup>

Although it may seem callous in retrospect, Churchill's argument was based in part on International Humanitarian Law, the Hague Convention of 1907 having specified that it was the duty of the occupying power to maintain the

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<sup>301</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1218 – MEW to Odier, 14 September 1940; *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.372.

<sup>302</sup> Winston Churchill, 'The Few' speech to the House of Commons, 20 August 1940 – *The Churchill Centre and Museum*, London: Cabinet War Rooms Museum, <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/speeches-of-winston-churchill/113-the-few>

(accessed 21 May 2008).

well-being of the population under their control.<sup>303</sup> Given, however, that the delegates had seen first hand the poor quality of the rations on offer from the Germans, the ICRC was understandably horrified by Churchill's declaration, which, in its reference to a distant and unlikely Allied military victory to the detriment of immediate humanitarian concerns, went against the very philosophy upon which the Committee was founded.

There was worse to come for the ICRC. Following Churchill's pronouncement Hugh Dalton declared that 'the British authorities should not facilitate the passage of any shipments for Switzerland through naval controls' – an action that was part of Dalton's general campaign throughout mid 1940 to strengthen the blockade's integrity around Switzerland.<sup>304</sup> Furthermore, when the issue of the ICRC's importance was raised in discussions between the Foreign Office and MEW over the increased measures against Switzerland, the fact that 'the Red Cross have an interest and would strongly object to being deprived of Switzerland as a channel of information' was deemed a factor that 'by itself cannot be given much weight'.<sup>305</sup>

In the midst of this mood to harden the blockade and, considering the failure of this task in regards to Vichy, it is unsurprising that Odier's appeals of August 1940, devoid as they were of an emphasis on how the supplies would be safeguarded once they reached France, were given little more than polite lip service before being refused. However, in the spirit of seeking to maintain good relations with the ICRC – particularly after the re-establishment of communication with the continent in early August revealed the gravity of the

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<sup>303</sup> *Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land* (The Hague, 1907), Sect.3, Article 43.

<sup>304</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/24534 – MEW to FO, 24 August 1940; Wylie, *Britain and Switzerland*, pp.134-135.

<sup>305</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/24534 – FO Report on Switzerland, 26 August 1940.

British POW situation – some concessions were made in regards to POWs.<sup>306</sup>

On 29 August the Ministry complied with Articles 37 and 38 of the Geneva Convention, by granting navicerts to the ICRC for the shipment of individual POW parcels provided, of course, that the camps to which they were sent had been inspected by the ICRC and a delegate was present to supervise the distribution.<sup>307</sup> Given that this was in line with the basic principles of the Geneva Convention – which the British were a signatory to – MEW's gesture was by no means a generous concession.

Understandably, this act of basic adherence to the Convention by the British was not enough for the persistent Odier, who disputed MEW's conditions for supervision on the grounds that unforeseen military situations could cut inspectors off from the camps and that, more importantly, there were camps which they were prohibited to visit – none of which notably contained British POWs. This, plus the refusal of MEW to allow the French Red Cross and the Vichy government to purchase bulk relief supplies from Portugal later that year for the benefit of French POWs, led to the ICRC's suspicions that Whitehall was deliberately acting in the interests of her own prisoners at the expense of the French. Rather than deal with this concern tactfully, Odier chose instead to voice bluntly the ICRC's concerns on this issue to MEW's Richard Illisible. This act that not only damaged her reputation in the eyes of the Ministry, but also further exacerbated Whitehall's aforementioned concern over the ICRC's closeness to Vichy and preference for serving continental, rather than British interests.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> In late July the number of POWs captured was estimated to be 12,000, though no official notification of the figure arrived until August, when it was increased to 15,000. The true figure of 44,000 did not come to light until December 1941 – ICRC:G3/3B/44-3 – ICRC London Report on Parcel Crisis – 24 January 1941.

<sup>307</sup> ICRC:G85/1047 – Illisible to Odier – 29 August 1940.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*; *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.30.

As flawed as Odier's approach was, her concerns over the French could not be dismissed as those of a lone agitator against British blockade policy. On 11 August Herbert Hoover, the former President of the United States, presented a plan for a wide-reaching relief effort similar to that which he had spearheaded during the First World War. This relief effort called for a relaxation of British blockade policy throughout Europe and, though the plan was generally greeted unfavourably by the US public and press, the issue of food for the children of unoccupied France was one that was viewed with sympathy by many relief organisations in America and indeed by Roosevelt himself.<sup>309</sup> In some US government quarters sympathy also extended to French POWs and in November the British embassy in Washington reported that it 'foresaw criticisms of our policy and political repercussions if we refuse navicerts for the bulk of the parcels for Allied prisoners in general'.<sup>310</sup>

The British reaction to this report is telling. Six days after being told of US attitudes MEW granted navicerts to the ICRC for the despatch of bulk shipments of collective parcels for British POWs and civilian internees. For internees of other nationalities, however, the question of prisoner numbers and ICRC supervision was still to be reviewed by MEW before any further concessions could be made.<sup>311</sup> Clearly, public opinion in Britain – which stressed the plight of British POWs – counted for more than the concern for *Allied* POWs that was being voiced in the United States. Placating the British public therefore, complemented Whitehall's policy of "Britain first, allies later".

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<sup>309</sup> Roosevelt's opinion was derived from Washington's policy at the time to improve relations with Vichy in the hope of encouraging resistance from the latter towards German demands – Jean Beaumont, 'Starving For Democracy: Blockade and Relief 1939-1945', *War and Society*, 8 (1990) 57-82, p.62; Medicott, *Blockade*, vol.1, pp.555-558; TNA:PRO FO 837/1218 – Lisbon to FO, 27 August 1940; Washington to FO, 6 September 1940, Washington to FO, 27 August 1940.

<sup>310</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1219 – Washington to FO, 1 November 1940.

<sup>311</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.205; ICRC:G85/1047 – Nicholls to Odier, 7 November 1940.

On the other side of the Atlantic, however, the British concessions served only to fuel Hoover's campaign, which escalated on 8 December when he published a manifesto on the need for a neutral body to administer relief in the occupied territories. This action served to only further infuriate Dalton, who recalled bitterly how he encouraged a German visiting the United States at this time to tell people 'that Hoover was responsible for prolonging the last war, and thus for the deaths on European battlefields of many young Americans'.<sup>312</sup>

It was in this tense environment that Odier launched a fresh round of appeals on relief for France, this time centred on the Committee's plan to acquire foodstuffs from within the blockaded areas. Although the idea of building upon the concessions for British POWs was a logical move on the part of the ICRC, the extrinsic factors that were at play over the winter of 1940-41 – the groundswell of public concern for British POWs and the related problems that were developing in British-ICRC relations – called for a more nuanced approach than that which typified Odier's efforts. It was for this reason that Odier's December initiative was seized upon by Carl Burckhardt, whose instincts for *realpolitik* led him to take a dim view of Odier's overly compassionate nature and lack of political acumen.<sup>313</sup>

Mindful of Odier's blunders in dealing with the British, Burckhardt's approach was to attempt something as yet untried by his predecessor: to tell MEW what it actually wanted to hear. Accordingly, Burckhardt added a covering letter to Odier's 3 December appeal, wherein he argued that in obtaining supplies for the benefit of French civilians from within Europe the ICRC was, in effect, denying the Germans those sources of supply.

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<sup>312</sup> Dalton, *Fateful Years*, p.355; Medicott, *Blockade*, vol.1, pp.572-573.

<sup>313</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.294, 373.

This argument was well received by Kit Stevenson at the Foreign Office, who noted to his colleagues that 'the International Committee have been at pains to avoid difficulties with our blockade' and, furthermore, 'that it is important to keep on terms with the International Committee on the relief question, and we should like to see a sympathetic reply sent to them'.<sup>314</sup> On 11 February 1941, such a reply was sent to Burckhardt in which he was thanked both for not upsetting the blockade by procuring supplies from outside Europe and also for the 'valuable work on the International Red Cross Committee for British prisoners of war and interned civilians'. These plaudits were tempered, however, by a reminder that 'so long as we and the International Red Cross Committee do not clash over this [blockade measures] we naturally view with unmixed sympathy and admiration the relief work which you are doing'.<sup>315</sup> As promising as these comments seemed, however, the appeal itself was refused. The reasons for this refusal become evident if one considers the results of other proposed relief projects at this time.

At the same time that Burckhardt's appeals were being rejected, similar efforts on the part of Hoover were at last bearing fruit. Under pressure both to draw Vichy away from German influence and placate Roosevelt – whose co-operation in maintaining the blockade in the Atlantic was invaluable – MEW reluctantly caved in to pressure for two trial shipments of milk and clothing for the children of unoccupied France.<sup>316</sup>

Given that it was agreed that this relief would be conducted under the auspices of the American Red Cross, it seems clear that for the British there

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<sup>314</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1219 – Odier to Dalton, 3 December 1940; TNA:PRO FO 837/1220 – Stevenson to Stirling, 24 January 1941.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid. – Stevenson to Burckhardt, 11 February 1941.

<sup>316</sup> Beaumont, 'Starving For Democracy', pp.62-63.

was a distinction between the American proposals and those of the ICRC, which did not benefit from the political weight of Roosevelt's concerns. This distinction was also formed by the perception in Whitehall that the ICRC's real job was to care for POWs rather than civilians. This was yet another hurdle the Committee had to overcome in its negotiations with MEW, whose policy was evident from Stevenson's polite, yet instructive correspondence with Burckhardt: The ICRC, though valuable for the preservation of British POWs, must be kept on a leash in regards to economic warfare.

Given its long-standing mandate to assist *all* victims of war, this restriction was viewed as anathema by the Committee. Accordingly, the ICRC continued its campaign against the blockade over the winter of 1940-41, albeit with a more shrewd attitude. With Stevenson's warning in mind, the Committee's winter round of appeals were characterised by an emphasis on the Ministry's supervision requirements.

In March, for example, Burckhardt sent an appeal wherein he explicitly stated that the Committee had obtained assurances from the Germans that 'none of the gifts sent will be used for the benefit of German civilians or members of the German armed forces' and furthermore, that they had also acquiesced to the ICRC's request for a delegate to be present at all times during the transit and distribution of the goods'.<sup>317</sup> During her visit to London a few weeks later, Odier gave similar assurances. She did, however, concede that on the question of civilian internees in occupied France – a category of prisoner predominantly comprising Jews and other "enemies of the Reich" – the Committee could not guarantee the safe delivery of the parcels.<sup>318</sup> On the

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<sup>317</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1221 – Burckhardt and de Rouge to Dalton, 7 March 1941.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid. – Minutes of Odier Meeting with MEW, 25 March 1941; Minutes of Second Odier Meeting with MEW, 28 March 1941.



whole, however, the general view of the Committee at this time was that its capacity for supervision, combined with the solemn pledge of non-interference obtained from the Germans, meant it had satisfied MEW's conditions as best it could.

For their part, the British were never convinced of this. The tales of British POWs who endured the march to the camps in 1940 only served as confirmation that the Nazis were both perfidious and thuggish, with no respect for humanitarian law. As such MEW held to the belief that any relief initiatives that were dependent on the words of Germans could not be countenanced. To the detriment of British-ICRC relations, the Committee held a contrasting view of Berlin's trustworthiness.

As mentioned in the introduction, the ICRC's leadership was both Euro-centric and right-wing in its political outlook. Huber and Burckhardt were both Swiss-Germans and the latter was, as one colleague recalled, a lover of 'German and Austro-Hungarian high culture'.<sup>319</sup> Tied to this was Burckhardt's friendship with certain Germans, namely Wolfgang Krauel and Ernst von Weizsäcker. Indeed, both Burckhardt and Max Huber went so far as to write after the war that Weizsäcker had been nothing short of a partner of the ICRC who was possessed of 'genuine sympathy to humanitarian ends', and had 'been responsible for any tolerant and generally comprehensive attitude shown us by the German authorities'.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.388, citing interview with Maître Lalive, 2 August, 1995.

<sup>320</sup> *Truman Papers* – Burckhardt and Huber To Truman, 5 August 1949, [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/nuremberg/documents/index.php?documentdate=1949-08-05&documentid=1-10&studycollectionid=&pagenumber=1](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/nuremberg/documents/index.php?documentdate=1949-08-05&documentid=1-10&studycollectionid=&pagenumber=1) (accessed 9 August 2008).

In addition to any personal relations between Geneva and Berlin, there was also the important matter of the ICRC's neutrality, which dictated that no belligerent – no matter how brutal its occupation practices – could be treated with discrimination by the ICRC. The combination of these two factors meant that for the duration of the war the ICRC placed trust in the promises and intentions of Berlin. Owing to the opposing view held by the British, the Committee's March appeals were once again rejected and four months after receiving the sincerest assurances of Burckhardt and Odier both the Foreign Office and MEW were still in agreement that 'no effective neutral control for distribution of goods could be achieved in occupied Europe'.<sup>321</sup>

The Committee's continued insistence to the contrary did little to help its cause. Indeed, it is evident that the repeated appeals of the ICRC served to frustrate, rather than to re-assure MEW, which from 1940 onwards was bombarded with blockade concession requests from Geneva. To these the British could only reiterate the position established by Churchill's speech of 20 August – military victory must come before relief. By mid 1941 this mantra was so firmly entrenched in MEW that it was decreed that it was unnecessary even to discuss alterations to blockade measures anymore.<sup>322</sup> Owing both to the mistrust of the Germans and the importance placed upon economic warfare by Churchill, no ICRC efforts to adhere to MEW's policy of supervision could change British minds. At best, the faith the Committee placed in German promises not to seize goods reinforced British perceptions of the Committee as naïve. At worst, it increased suspicions that the ICRC was either close to, or working in collusion with, the Nazis.

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<sup>321</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1221 – Notes on conversation between Eden and Nichols, 22 July 1941.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid. – MEW Briefing on Relief Policy, 9 May 1941.

The scatty and at times un-focused nature of Odier's correspondence did little to alter the former perception. An example of this can be found in the letter she sent on 3 April to Walter Roberts – a PWD official who had little to do with MEW – requesting answers to questions that had for the most part already been answered during her meetings with the Ministry in March. To this odd correspondence J.S. Nichols replied patiently, though somewhat condescendingly, and once again reiterated that the question of civilian relief for France was still 'under consideration'.<sup>323</sup> Generally speaking, this often-repeated phrase was a euphemism for "unalterable", and was a means of placating the ICRC, who would normally have to wait several weeks before receiving refusals of their appeals. In the time spent waiting for a reply the Committee continued to pursue the task which the British clearly thought it best fit – maintaining the welfare of British POWs.

This pattern of placation and restraint continued for the duration of the war, though not without further incident. Ironically, the largest disturbance to MEW's handling of the ICRC was caused by the British themselves, who were pushed out of Greece and Crete by the Axis forces in the spring of 1941. It was in this new theatre of relief operations that the Committee achieved its most significant victory in the struggle against the blockade – the formation of the Joint Relief Commission and the creation of a semi-autonomous Red Cross fleet.

### **GREECE AND THE "GREAT WHITE SHIPS"**

As the unresolved issue of permanent relief for France and Belgium continued to drag on, the Committee was faced with yet another challenge to its efforts on behalf of civilians. On 6 April 1941 German forces drove south into the Balkans and Greece. Much like the campaigns in Western Europe, the *Wehrmacht* were quick to achieve their objectives and by 2 May Greece had

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid. – Odier to Roberts, 3 April 1941; Nichols to Odier, 5 April 1941.

formally surrendered to the Axis invasion force. The resulting conditions for Allied POWs have been discussed in the previous chapter, so too the energetic response to their plight by the ICRC delegation in Athens and in particular its leader, Robert Brunel. Relevant to this chapter are the actions of the ICRC to bring succour to the other victims of war in Greece – the civilian population.

In the wake of capitulation the people of Greece and Crete were subjected to consequences of occupation similar to those experienced by French civilians, enduring not only the day to day distress of having enemy troops on their soil, but the arbitrary requisitioning of food by those troops as well as the many problems associated with the movement of refugees from war-torn areas. Where the fate of Greece differed from that of France, however, was in its almost non-existent capacity for food production. A staple like wheat for example, had always been imported from overseas at a pre-war rate of 500,000 tonnes annually. When the Axis took over, these imports – predominately from Commonwealth nations – ceased.

This breakdown in food availability was compounded by a poor harvest, requisitioning and what one historian has described as 'infighting of Byzantine complexity' between Italian generals, German diplomats and Greek puppet administrators.<sup>324</sup> The result was that both mainland Greece and, more so, its islands, were beset by famine for most of the occupation period.<sup>325</sup>

The effects of this situation were felt almost immediately in Athens and on 30 May Robert Brunel sent a plea to Geneva for urgent relief for the increasingly starving women and children in the capital. Much like its response to Brunel's

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<sup>324</sup> Mazower, *Hitler's Greece*, p.22.

<sup>325</sup> Procopis Papastratis, *British Policy Towards Greece During the Second World War* (Cambridge, 1984), pp.114-15. On Italian disputes with the Germans and the famine in general see Mazower, *Hitler's Greece*, ch.3.

information on the Dulags, the ICRC moved as quickly as possible to take action. Having procured 100 tonnes of milk from the American Red Cross warehouses in Egypt the ICRC cabled MEW on 19 June requesting permission to despatch the goods to Greek port of Piraeus. The request, however, was not as straightforward as simply applying for a navicert. Owing to a lack of merchant shipping, the Italian Foreign Minister Count Ciano advocated a plan where the supplies would be transported by the Italian Red Cross, which along with the Italian and German occupation forces agreed to organise the distribution of the goods to the Greek population.<sup>326</sup>

Apart from the not unreasonable reluctance of MEW to agree to such an Axis-dependent operation, the Ministry also initially refused to allow the milk products into Greece unless they had been sourced from within the blockade area, namely Switzerland. Given the fact that by this time the ICRC already had the milk ready and waiting just across the sea in Egypt, MEW received a swift protest to this provision from the Greek ambassador in London and in what can only be described as a capitulation to political pressure, Dalton reluctantly agreed to the ICRC's plan to despatch this one-off milk shipment.

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What was unspoken at MEW and, moreover, what the ICRC did not appear to realise, was that the outcome of this trial relief shipment would shape British attitudes towards relief proposals for Greece for some time to come. This was unfortunate for the Committee, as the unresolved problems of supervision in France hung like a cloud over the entire Greek operation. Although a success

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<sup>326</sup> Ciano showed disapproval of German requisitioning practices and was concerned over the political repercussions of the famine for the occupation forces. He sought and received Mussolini's approval to turn the relief operation over to the Italian Red Cross – Count Galeazzo Ciano, *Ciano's Diary: 1939-1943* (Surrey, 1948), 9 and 11 October 1941, pp.381-382, 26 January 1942, p.427; *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.451, TNA:PRO FO 837/1230 – Geneva to MEW, 19 June 1941.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.* – MEW To Berne, 3 July 1941; Simopoulos to Dalton, 16 July 1941.

in terms of bringing some small measure of immediate relief to the civilian population, the facts and figures of this first shipment did more harm than good for the cause of the Committee, whose guarantees from the Axis powers were once again undermined.

Of the 100 tonnes distributed, only 63 tonnes were received – a peculiar discrepancy that the ICRC's post-war report glosses over without explanation.

<sup>328</sup> A report on 28 July from the British embassy in Washington gives some indication of what really happened. According to British sources in Rome, the Italian government, their Red Cross, and their occupation forces had conspired to steal a large portion of the consignment as well as meat and other canned goods received from individual donations.<sup>329</sup> This gave weight to a suspicion within the Foreign Office that reports received from Athens in early May of the worsening food situation may have been 'German inspired', a means of fooling both the British and the Red Cross into shipping supplies into Greece for the occupation forces.<sup>330</sup>

In addition to placing another black mark against the ICRC's distribution guarantees, the backlash to this initial effort on behalf of Greece was also felt in parliament where Anthony Eden – who in the wake of public criticism over the POW crisis had become a supporter of a more flexible blockade policy – was attacked by Dalton on 28 July for supporting the Committee's follow-up proposal for a similar relief effort involving the shipment of milk products for the children of Belgium.<sup>331</sup> This proposal, sent in the form of a personal letter

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<sup>328</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.451.

<sup>329</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1230 – Washington to FO, 27 July 1941.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.* – FO to Canea, 1 May 1941.

<sup>331</sup> In considering Eden's proposals Dalton dubbed him a 'lightweight', reminiscent of 'a little boy trying to clutch all the toys' – Hugh Dalton, *The Second World War Diary of Hugh Dalton 1940-45*, ed. Ben Pimlott (London, 1986), 28 July 1941, p.262.

from Carl Burckhardt to Lord Drogheda at MEW on 15 July, was notable for its boldness and indicates clearly that, in obtaining the concession for the milk shipment to Athens, the Committee thought that MEW had at last turned the page on its blockade policy.

As well as declaring that the ICRC was assured that no Axis interference was taking place in Greece, Burckhardt also found cause to mention that MEW's acquiescence to the Belgium proposal would:

without doubt produce a favourable atmosphere tending rapidly to counteract a certain resentment which I feel duty bound to mention, is beginning to be noticeable in many countries on the Continent at the sight of so much suffering amongst the innocent especially in countries whose behaviour, as in the case of Greece and Belgium, had been so gallant.<sup>332</sup>

All ostentatious wordplay aside, Burckhardt's message was obvious: agree to the proposal or face a wave of public criticism for deserting your Allies. This was one of the many occasions during the war in which Burckhardt attempted to play the part of political commentator and diplomat – a pretension the Foreign Office in particular seldom appreciated.

Unmoved by the veiled threat, Drogheda minuted Stirling that Burckhardt's 'entirely unreal and futile suggestion' must be rejected. Another MEW staffer, W.A. Camps, also seems to have been affronted by Burckhardt's efforts, which he deemed 'very obnoxious' given that 'even as Mr. B was penning his second paragraph, the Germans were stealing condensed milk sent to the children of Greece'.<sup>333</sup> Despite the fact that the War Cabinet and MEW had agreed to maintain the stringency of the blockade in late July, Drogheda waited until 6 September before sending Burckhardt the official rejection to

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<sup>332</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1221 – Burckhardt to Drogheda, 15 July 1941.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid. – Drogheda Minute, 19 August 1941; Camps Minute, 18 August 1941.

his proposals, wherein the recent seizure of milk products in Greece was highlighted as evidence of the hollowness of any German guarantee of non-interference.<sup>334</sup> The Ministry had been fooled once, but it would not be fooled again.

Although MEW was solidly behind Drogheda on this matter, there were officials in other areas of the Foreign Office who understood Burckhardt's message and, moreover, were alive to the political value of blockade concessions. Eden for one sought shades of grey in blockade policy, if only to temper the growing discontent the Belgian and Norwegian governments-in-exile had towards the situation.<sup>335</sup> As such Eden confided to Nichols on 22 July his wish for Churchill to take a greater interest in the political aspects of the blockade instead of simply declaring that it must be maintained at all costs.<sup>336</sup>

Eden's subsequent public endorsement of the ICRC initiative and resulting opposition to MEW's hard line view should not, however, be interpreted as the permeation of philanthropy into British foreign policy. The same day that Eden made his suggestion in parliament a memo was circulated at the Foreign Office suggesting that

'apart from the purely humanitarian side of the question the political consideration involved should not be over-looked. It has been known that the German propaganda in Greece loses no opportunity to point out that the tragic situation is due to the policy of the British Government.....the ICRC of Geneva should be informed of the steps which are being taken in view of alleviating the situation, and particularly that instructions may be given in view of authorising

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<sup>334</sup> An example of the degree to which debate was unwelcome on the blockade issue can be seen in the 'complete defeat' of Eden's motion in the Cabinet on 28 July for concessions to Belgium – Dalton, *Diary*, pp.262-263; TNA:PRO FO 837/1221 – Drogheda to Burckhardt, 6 September 1941.

<sup>335</sup> Beaumont, 'Starving for Democracy', p.65.

<sup>336</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1221 – Notes of conversation between Nichols and Eden, 22 July 1941.



the transport of those food stuffs (particularly milk for the children) in which the ICRC is interested'.<sup>337</sup>

For the Foreign Office, therefore, the situation in Greece presented a unique opportunity to repair some of the damage done to the government's reputation both by the POW crisis and the blockade of France – damage that had been compounded by allegations in the US press that the British were once again favouring their own POWs at the expense of their 'heroic Greek Allies'.<sup>338</sup>

A certain degree of flexibility was thus deemed required in regards to the blockade, although in pursuing this agenda the Foreign Office understood that it had to tread carefully in the public presentation of these arguments for relief. In a telegram to the British ambassador in Ankara, Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen, it was emphasised that Eden's wishes for a relief effort had to be conveyed as appeals by the Greek government to the ICRC, lest British eagerness on the matter be interpreted as weakness in the realms of economic warfare.<sup>339</sup>

As the Foreign Office began to formulate this policy similarly divisive moves towards rectifying the blockade problem were being made in Geneva. Over the summer of 1941 Burckhardt, who by this time had taken the difficult reins from Odier in the protracted negotiations with MEW, brought one of his most ambitious and inspired plans to fruition. This was the co-ordination of the ICRC's relief efforts with those of the national societies represented by the League of Red Cross Societies, into what was termed the Joint Relief Commission (JRC). Although far from original, Burckhardt's conception was a

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<sup>337</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1230 – FO Memo, 28 July 1941.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid. – Angora to FO, 15 August 1941.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid. – FO to Angora, 24 August 1941.

bold plan. This was owing not only to the logistics of co-ordinating efforts between Geneva and the national societies, but also to the difficulty in overcoming the long simmering grievances that existed between the ICRC and the League.<sup>340</sup>

Perhaps fearful of the “power play” Burckhardt was making, Jacques Chenevière, the ICRC’s own Cato, offered little encouragement, ending many a meeting on the subject of Burckhardt’s idea by simply declaring: *‘la league a tort.’*<sup>341</sup> Wrong or not, the League of Red Cross Societies’ ability both to co-ordinate national relief efforts in a more focused manner than the ICRC and, as the concessions to Vichy indicate, to garner more favourable responses from the blockading authorities, were vital for the improvement of the ICRC’s relief efforts. Burckhardt recognised this fact early on, instigating informal co-ordination efforts between the national societies and the ICRC as early as November 1940. Prompted by the situation in Greece, this co-operation became official on 23 July 1941, when the JRC was legally constituted with Burckhardt as its president.<sup>342</sup>

True to form, Burckhardt took to this new position of influence with his usual mixture of ambitious energy and single-minded self-importance. He made it clear to the ICRC leadership for example, that Odier’s duties should be kept separate from the JRC, a recommendation the latter wisely agreed to despite the protestations of Chenevière.<sup>343</sup> Considering Burckhardt’s bad experiences with Odier in the blockade negotiations, this move was understandable, although he was not driven in this regard purely by spite.

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<sup>340</sup> See introduction, pp.17-18.

<sup>341</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.387.

<sup>342</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.494.

<sup>343</sup> ICRC:CO2 1.925 – Minutes of ICRC meeting, 26 June 1941.

Maître Lalive, a Geneva-based lawyer who was brought onboard in early 1941 to help set up the JRC, recalled that Burckhardt's intent was to raise the prestige of the ICRC, help the civilians of Europe and in the process keep the entire project (and the praise it garnered) out of the hands of the likes of Chenevière and Odier.<sup>344</sup> There is evidence to back Lalive's statement. When, for example, Burckhardt reviewed a draft minute sheet of a meeting between the ICRC and the British later that year on the subject of expanding the Red Cross fleet under the JRC's auspices, he made it clear to the British that it should be placed on record that the concept of the fleet's expansion 'was dealt with by me and not by Mademoiselle Odier. I should very much appreciate it if this could be made clear, as I do not want Mlle Odier to have all the onus'.<sup>345</sup> For Burckhardt the JRC was, as much as anything, an exercise in personal empire-building and, given the high opinion he had of himself, he and he alone would be its architect.

Part of what spurred Burckhardt's possessive attitude was his assumption that the JRC would earn high praise for its successes. This assumption was not misplaced. In his post-war memoir Marcel Junod claimed that *he* was the mastermind and instigator of one of the JRC's greatest innovations, the formation of the Red Cross' fleet of relief vessels – the White Ships as Junod dubbed them. In telling the tale of the fleet's conception, Junod relegated Burckhardt to simply being his 'tireless and energetic abettor' in the scheme.<sup>346</sup> Certainly Junod did pay a visit to London in April 1941 to discuss shipping issues, at which he received permission for the Committee to use the Red Cross emblem on its vessels. However, in keeping with the frosty relationship

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<sup>344</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, pp.386-87 citing interview with Maître Lalive, 2 August, 1995.

<sup>345</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/113 – Burckhardt to Roberts, 22 December 1941.

<sup>346</sup> Junod, *Warrior Without Weapons*, p.176.

that existed between the blockading authorities and the ICRC, his appeals for a widening of the relief effort fell on deaf and generally dismissive ears.<sup>347</sup>

Burckhardt would not be similarly denied. Armed with his experiences of MEW and an awareness of the importance of stable shipping for relief operations, it was Burckhardt more than anyone, whether for reasons of personal ambition or otherwise, who crystallised the idea of the White Ships and used the JRC to push the Committee towards success in Greece in 1941.<sup>348</sup>

The first such success came on 16 October when a Turkish freighter, the *Kurtulus*, laden with 5,000 tonnes of wheat and flying under the banner of the Turkish National Red Crescent Society, unloaded its much needed cargo at Piraeus. In keeping with the co-operative structure of the JRC, Junod, representing Geneva, was onboard the Turkish Red Crescent vessel and once the ship had docked ICRC delegates supervised the unloading of its cargo.<sup>349</sup> This first of a total of five voyages made by the *Kurtulus*, before it ran aground and sank on 20 February 1942, has quite rightly been seen in recent years as a triumph of philanthropy in the midst of total war.<sup>350</sup> At the time, however, the initial October shipment was viewed in Britain similarly to the milk shipment of July, that is, as a stand alone concession that was necessitated by the gravity of the food situation in Greece, where, as Churchill declared 'alone of all Allied countries the enemy allows wholesale starvation conditions to develop'.<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> ICRC Report, vol.3, p.141; Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.390.

<sup>348</sup> Crossland, 'Burckhardt'.

<sup>349</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.496.

<sup>350</sup> In 2005 a team of Turkish divers uncovered the wreck of the *Kurtulus* in the Sea of Marmara and produced a documentary on the importance of the relief effort it was involved in entitled *SS Kurtulus: The Steamship That Carried Peace*.

<sup>351</sup> Warren F. Kimball, ed., *Churchill and Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence*, 3 vols. (New Jersey, 1984), vol.2, C-250 – 1 January 1942, p.105.

Such noble justification was only part of the reason behind the British decision to relent on the blockade issue. MEW for example, was put in a position to be more receptive to the voyage of the *Kurtulus* than it had been to previous relief suggestions. This was owing to the fact that the *Kurtulus* mission was a JRC effort that made use of the Turkish Red Crescent, a neutral national society, to transport wheat from Turkey, a country within the blockade area. MEW's regulations were not being violated therefore, and so it was immune from any accusations of softness in its blockade policy.<sup>352</sup>

The Foreign Office seized on the importance of this loophole and quickly reversed its policy 'that there should be no publicity and no official blessing on our part as regards shipments by sea'<sup>353</sup> when, inevitably, the story of the proposed mission leaked to the press. Owing to the fact that the Ministry's policy was not being challenged, however, the British were able to take the advantageous angle that the *Kurtulus* was a pragmatic and blockade-friendly means of showing 'the Greeks that their friends outside are trying to help them'.<sup>354</sup> The British were thus able to distance their leniency in this affair from the hard line approach to the blockade for the rest of Europe. MEW's view was that despite the loophole, this blockade would to remain in force while the *Kurtulus* – no more than a stop-gap measure – provided the Greeks with food and the British with good publicity.

The ICRC of course held a different view. On the heels of permission being granted for the *Kurtulus* to sail, Burckhardt sent an appeal to Lord Drogheda aimed at widening the relief effort, specifically requesting a navicert for a

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<sup>352</sup> The original plan proposed by the ICRC in May 1941 was to ship grain from Russia. This was rejected by the British on the grounds that it would involve an overland route through the Balkans which would involve breaking the blockade – Medlicott, *Blockade*, vol.2, pp.263-64.

<sup>353</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1232 – FO to Camps, 19 September 1941.

<sup>354</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1221 – MEW to Angora, 7 September 1941.

shipment of quinine to Greece via another ship, the *Laconikos*. Once again the reply to this appeal took over a month to arrive in Geneva, and when received it spoke only of the need for tighter supervision on the ground before a navicert would be granted for the shipment.<sup>355</sup> The British policy of the *Kurtulus* being a one time gesture, that was not intended 'to commit us to send further shipments to Greece or to make concessions to other enemy-occupied countries', was still firmly in place.<sup>356</sup> As winter descended on Greece, however, the British position became increasingly untenable.

Months after the first voyage, a report from the Red Cross delegation in Athens called into question the extent of the success achieved by the *Kurtulus* mission, noting that although the relief deliveries had been of great initial benefit:

general living conditions in Greece have deteriorated so greatly meanwhile that only an immediate and massive increase in the quantities of food coming in, more varied than those received hitherto, can prevent a catastrophe without precedent in the history of modern Europe.<sup>357</sup>

Similar reports were received in Britain from Knatchbull-Hugessen who noted that the grain carried by the *Kurtulus* had been of a poor quality and that, on the advice of the ICRC, he felt compelled to support the prospect of further shipments.<sup>358</sup>

As a measure of the situation's gravity Burckhardt, with Odier in tow, chose to travel to London in December 1941 to discuss the matter in person with

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<sup>355</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1232 – Burckhardt to Drogheda, 7 October 1941; Drogheda to Burckhardt, 11 November 1941.

<sup>356</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1231 – War Cabinet Memo, 14 February 1942.

<sup>357</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.497 citing ICRC Athens report December 1941.

<sup>358</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1232 – Istanbul to UK Commercial Corporation, 28 October 1941.

Foreign Office and MEW officials. This was an audacious move on Burckhardt's part and his exact motives for a personal visitation were questioned by many within the Foreign Office, who suspected he would use the opportunity to pursue his 'political ambitions'.<sup>359</sup> This impression was not helped when, in late November a report from Czech intelligence sources in Berne indicated that the president of the Swiss Federal Council, Marcel Pilet-Golaz had instructed Burckhardt to use his trip to London as a cover to bring over documents outlining a proposed peace deal for a "New Order" in Europe.<sup>360</sup> The unease that ensued at the Foreign Office hung like a black cloud over preliminary plans for the visit and it was only once David Kelly officially warned Burckhardt to stick to Red Cross matters whilst in Britain that the Foreign Office agreed to let him into the country.<sup>361</sup> Although he did not present an official peace feeler, there is evidence to suggest that Burckhardt did talk peace – broadly and hopelessly – with the by then politically unimportant Rab Butler.<sup>362</sup>

Aside from reservations over Burckhardt's personal objectives, MEW was also wary of the Red Cross man's growing ambitions for Geneva's relief schemes in Europe. The decision was made long before Burckhardt set foot on British soil to avoid any significant blockade discussions with him, given that the Ministry's 'attitude was necessarily a negative one'.<sup>363</sup> To MEW the visit was a pointless and, if peace feelers were considered, possibly dangerous, exercise.

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<sup>359</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/113 – Strang and Roberts Minutes, 21 Oct 1941.

<sup>360</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/26544 – Strang Minute, 18 Nov 1941; FO to Washington, 18 Nov 1941.

<sup>361</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/113 – FO to Berne, 22 Oct 1941. That Burckhardt did not do so is

<sup>362</sup> This was Burckhardt's final peace feeler, which probably consisted of little more than him voicing the hopes of the German Opposition leader, Ulrich von Hassell, for the removal of Hitler and the concluding of a peace deal with Britain. Burckhardt had met with von Hassell prior to and after he returned from his visit to London – Crossland, 'Burckhardt'; *Von Hassell Diaries*, 9 August 1941, p.189, 24 January 1942, pp.217–18.

<sup>363</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/113 – FO Minutes, 21 October 1941.

Despite these opinions and the evident expectation at MEW that the ICRC visitation would herald yet another easily-dismissed appeal, Burckhardt was able to achieve both a partial lifting of the blockade of Greece and tentative approval from Whitehall for the expansion of Red Cross shipping operations elsewhere. Accordingly, on 9 January 1942 the Foreign Office informed Knatchbull-Hugessen that a second supply ship, the *Hallaren*, was to 'get to the scene of the action' in Greece as soon as possible.<sup>364</sup> This concession was not a sign of British solidarity on the issue.

It was the Foreign Office, in spite of protests from MEW that reports of starvation had been exaggerated and that action to broaden the relief effort constituted a 'complete reversal of policy', which insisted that Greece was a 'special case' amongst the occupied territories and so warranted immediate attention.<sup>365</sup> This point of view was compounded both by an increase in public criticism of Whitehall's blockade and a dramatic appeal 'not only to mercy but to expediency' from Oliver Lyttelton, the British minister of state in Cairo, who declared that, 'however much the enemy is to blame, history will I believe pronounce a stern judgement on our policy', which he foresaw would be detrimental to Anglo-Greek relations for generations to come.<sup>366</sup>

Although these and other outside influences have generally been viewed by historians as the reasons for the British concessions to Greece, the importance of the ICRC's dogged campaign and, moreover, those who conducted it, also needs to be considered.<sup>367</sup> Even with agitation from within

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<sup>364</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1234 – FO to Angora, 9 January 1942.

<sup>365</sup> The Foreign Office's primary argument was that unlike the rest of Europe, the Germans had left the occupation of Greece to the Italians, who were notorious for their poor administration – TNA:PRO FO 837/1231 – War Cabinet Minutes, 24 December 1941.

<sup>366</sup> TNA:PRO PREM 3/74/5 – Cairo to FO, 9 January 1942.

<sup>367</sup> Beaumont presents the best conclusion of this view by stating that the blockade concessions were 'in part politically motivated', with public agitation only playing a limited role in bringing



and without, the British government would have had little basis for a practical relief scheme were it not for the plans presented to them by the ICRC.

Although the United States-based Greek War Relief Association could provide money to purchase food, neither the Italians, nor the Germans – who regarded 'occupation as a matter of profit and loss' – had displayed any capability to organise the means to distribute the supplies.<sup>368</sup> It fell to the ICRC, therefore, to implement such a scheme.

It is true that the ICRC's plans were slow to solidify into something tangible. The written appeals from Geneva throughout 1940-41 had yielded only marginal gains, and the efforts of Odier had done more to damage the ICRC's reputation than to strengthen the legitimacy of its efforts. Yet the plans for shipping presented during the meetings in London were better thought out, addressed the British concerns in a more pragmatic manner and as such were well received.<sup>369</sup>

In addition to having more refined proposals for relief, the ICRC also had in Burckhardt a delegate whom the British – all suspicions of motive notwithstanding – were inclined to take more seriously than Haccius, Odier and even Junod. Unlike the aforementioned delegates, Burckhardt had an established reputation, particularly with those at the Foreign Office, as more a diplomat than a mere philanthropist. As such Burckhardt could not be so easily dismissed as the well-meaning unknowns who had come before him.

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about policy change – Beaumont, 'Starving For Democracy', p.68. A similar view is presented by Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.394, Mazower, *Hitler's Greece*, p.47 and Papastratis, *British Policy Towards Greece*, pp.116-117. Medlicott also points out the importance of US acquiescence to wheat shipments, given by Cordell Hull on 11 December and re-affirmed by Washington's agreement on 9 January to no longer withhold US Dollars for purchases of supplies in Turkey. – Medlicott, *Blockade*, vol.2, p.267.

<sup>368</sup> Mazower, *Hitler's Greece*, p.46.

<sup>369</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/113 – Minutes of ICRC Meeting with British government Departments, 9-10 December 1941.

The realisation at the Foreign Office that it would be 'impolitic' for Burckhardt to be given the 'cold shoulder' supports this argument.<sup>370</sup>

It is also relevant that unlike other ICRC delegates, Burckhardt had British supporters – or at the very least, Britons who acknowledged Burckhardt's importance – in high places. Anthony Eden knew Burckhardt from the latter's work with the League of Nations and though their interactions during this period were often wary, it is undeniable that in the autumn of 1942 both men were united in the view that the blockade needed alteration. Walter Roberts at the PWD was also supportive of Burckhardt's visit and, having chaperoned him for the duration, he reported the Red Cross man's sensible nature and correct behaviour throughout his time in Britain.<sup>371</sup>

David Kelly was also instrumental in allaying Whitehall's fears over Burckhardt's peaceable intentions in the months leading to the visit. Kelly also recommended to his colleagues that they acknowledge Burckhardt's desire to be viewed as 'an international figure, rather than the philosopher and historian he truly is'.<sup>372</sup> To this end, Kelly joined officials from the BRC in putting forward the idea of French-speaking guides for Burckhardt – whose English was poor – and the organising of hunting trips in Scotland, special treatment that was not extended to any other ICRC representatives who visited Britain's shores.<sup>373</sup> These discussions over Burckhardt, combined with the extrinsic agitations for relief in Greece, meant that the December meetings heralded not only the ICRC's first major breakthrough on the matter

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid. - PWD Minutes, 22 November 1941.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid. – PWD to Berne, 29 December 1941.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid. – Berne to FO, 19 October 1941.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid. – Berne to FO, 17 October 1941; FO Minutes, 21 October 1941; Berne to FO, 19 October 1941.

of relief for Europe, but also the first time the British took a visit from Geneva seriously.

That is not to say that all Burckhardt's plans were welcomed. Certain schemes, such as his proposal for a Red Cross plane to transport mail between the continent and Britain were inevitably dismissed as 'utopian' by Whitehall's officials.<sup>374</sup> Proposals for the empowerment of the JRC as the pre-eminent post-war relief service were, however, better received by MEW. Burckhardt was so excited by this development that he felt the need immediately to cable the news back to Geneva.<sup>375</sup> Despite this enthusiasm for the scheme the fact remains that it was a programme for post-war Europe, a logical facet of MEW's long standing policy of stockpiling relief in expectation of military victory. As such MEW's co-operation on this issue was more a bonus to Burckhardt's ambitions for the JRC than it was a breakthrough on more pressing blockade issues. Furthermore, it was a promise that rang hollow, for as early as July 1942 both the US State Department and the British government began a policy of restricting the JRC's attempts to stockpile goods in Geneva.<sup>376</sup>

The other primary area of discussion – one which encapsulated both immediate humanitarian needs and Burckhardt's ambitious plans for the Committee's expansion – was the issue of enlarging Red Cross shipping operations not just in Greece, but anywhere that was affected by the ever-widening war. The idea of an independent fleet of ships which would act, in the words of Junod, as 'stretcher bearers and ambulances' by being able to

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<sup>374</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/115 – Roberts to Camps, 15 December 1941.

<sup>375</sup> ICRC:G85/1047 – Livingston to Duchosal, 5 December 1941.

<sup>376</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1224 – State Department to British Embassy, 28 July 1942.

'move about freely on the battlefield at agreed times'<sup>377</sup> had first been proposed at the 14<sup>th</sup> ICRC Conference in 1930 and once again with the Commission of Naval Experts in Geneva in 1937. On both occasions the idea was abandoned owing to 'legal, practical and financial obstacles'.<sup>378</sup>

It is a testament both to Burckhardt's ambitions and the gravity of the situation in both Western Europe and Greece that such hitherto insurmountable difficulties were now tackled in earnest. But, if war time circumstances rendered issues of shipping more imperative to address, their consideration was no less laborious. One of the first questions posed was how to guarantee the neutrality of the vessels, both in terms of flag and crew.

When, for example, Burckhardt suggested that the ICRC take possession of the *Frédéric*, a Belgian freighter that had been detained at Casablanca since the start of the war, the fact that the ship had a Portuguese captain and a Belgian crew meant that assurances and 'a definite plan covering all matters connected with the use of the vessel' had to be obtained from the Portuguese and the Belgian government-in-exile.<sup>379</sup> This was in addition to obtaining guarantees from Berlin for the safe passage of the vessel before the idea could finally be approved by the British Admiralty and the War Office.

Suffice to say, the issue of the White Ships, like so many aspects of the blockade negotiations, were debated at length over the course of many months. That is not to suggest that the belligerents stonewalled the question of shipping during this time, for as negotiations continued over the question of the White Ships, progress was made in other areas of Red Cross shipping. On

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<sup>377</sup> Junod, *Warrior Without Weapons*, p.176.

<sup>378</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.128.

<sup>379</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/113 – ICRC delegation meeting with British government representatives, 12 December 1941.

9 April a concession was once again granted to the American Red Cross by the British government which, in conjunction with the Swiss Federal Council, agreed to the opening up of 2,000-3,000 extra tons of cargo space for the Red Cross onboard Swiss merchant vessels on the trans-Atlantic route to Lisbon.<sup>380</sup> This concession, however, was less aimed at providing relief for civilian internees, than it was at having enough parcels for British POWs recently captured during the North African campaign.

The real development in shipping came a few days later on 14 April with the establishment in Basle of the Foundation for the Organisation of Red Cross Transport. Although the Foundation's board of Swiss bankers and merchants also included the ICRC delegate Paul Logoz, the organisation was legally registered as being autonomous from the ICRC – a convenient means of getting around the thorny issue of Geneva spending ICRC funds on ships rather than relief supplies. With the buying power of this purely neutral coalition, plans got underway to secure the *Frédéric* through an inventive purchasing scheme that seems to have been devised to pre-empt the by now predictable concerns of MEW over the possibility of the Axis benefiting from the arrangement.<sup>381</sup>

Mindful of these concerns, the Foundation organised a scheme whereby payment was to be reserved until the end of hostilities, with the Belgian owners agreeing to purchase the ship back at the original sale price. This method was used to acquire two more ships, the American freighters *Spokane* and *Oriente*, which along with the *Frédéric* were renamed *Caritas I*, *Caritas II* and the *Henry Dunant* respectively. These, together with nine additional

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<sup>380</sup> ICRC Report, vol.3, p.156.

<sup>381</sup> Of concern was the notion of vessels purchased in Europe being seized by the Germans after the Allies had donated money for their repairs and maintenance – TNA:PRO FO 916/333 – MEW to PWD, 6 August 1942.

vessels, formed the nucleus of the White Ships fleet, which would eventually total 43 vessels by war's end.<sup>382</sup>

Such achievements could not have been made without a resolution to the second major problem of the White Ships – how exactly were they to be used? That this question was a vexed one for the belligerents is evidenced from the fact that, despite receiving the official announcement of the Foundation's formation and goals on 26 May, approval for sailing conditions was not given until 23 July.<sup>383</sup> As part of its argument for approval the Committee made sure to stress the benefits of the White Ships not just for civilians but, more importantly, for British POWs.

On 15 July Burckhardt informed Walter Roberts at the PWD of his concerns over the lack of ICRC shipping tonnage and how this would affect 'the requirements of the British prisoners, as well as those of other nationalities who have fought or are fighting on the side of the United Kingdom'. These requirements would, Burckhardt argued, 'take on considerable extension before next winter and very great supplies of relief such as food, clothing, medicaments, tobacco, surgical articles will be called for'.<sup>384</sup> This appeal for a need to prepare for the coming winter was followed a few days later by another proposal from the Committee for increased shipping, in which the suggestion that 'cold weather uniforms will be required for British prisoners of war captured at Tobruk' was mentioned in the opening paragraph.<sup>385</sup> This attempt by the Committee to appeal to British self interest appears to have been influential, for on the same day approval for the White Ships was given

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<sup>382</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.476-77.

<sup>383</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/333 – ICRC Report on setting up of Foundation, 26 May 1942; Berne to FO, 7 July 1942; TNA:PRO FO 837/1235 – FO to Cairo, 24 June 1942.

<sup>384</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/333 – Burckhardt to Roberts, 15 July 1942.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid. – Geneva to FO, 28 July 1942.

the PWD voiced its concerns to the BRC on the need for increased relief efforts for British POWs captured in North Africa.<sup>386</sup>

Throughout much of the White Ships negotiations, however, the British focus appears to have been less on the benefits of the scheme and more on the need to rein in any suggestions of ICRC autonomy on the high seas. The original, and characteristically idealistic, wishes of the Committee were that the ships be used for the exchange of POWs and civilian internees, the delivery of mail and the transport of relief supplies for all categories of prisoners. The British response was also characteristic, with permission given only for the latter provision and then only if the supplies in question already had a navicert and the shipping route had been communicated to the Admiralty well in advance. The idea of passengers was completely out of the question for security reasons, so too the idea of mail being transported beyond the reach of the censor – a refusal the British insisted be put in writing before agreeing to the overall provisions.<sup>387</sup> Whitehall was determined, therefore, to make sure that if the ICRC possessed a fleet it would sail only under British conditions and, if any additional ships were acquired, their specific role be outlined to MEW prior to purchase.<sup>388</sup>

This was not the only attempt by the British during this period to clamp down on notions of autonomy and expansion in Geneva. Although the ICRC's official historian presents the development of the fleet as a neat and natural extension of Burckhardt and Odier's December negotiations, the truth is that

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<sup>386</sup> This was in reference to the approximately 33,000 British and Commonwealth troops taken prisoner at Tobruk – Ibid. – PWD to BRC, 23 July 1942; Rollings, *Prisoner of War*, p.19.

<sup>387</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.142.

<sup>388</sup> ICRC:G85/1048 – MEW to Burckhardt, 30 June 1942.

path to agreement on Red Cross shipping was fraught with debate, distrust and manipulation on the part of the British.<sup>389</sup>

These machinations were focused on the situation in Greece and appear to have had their genesis in Burckhardt and Odier's visit to London in December 1941. Despite outward displays of agreement to Burckhardt's proposals, internally MEW was still highly critical. In the wake of the despatch of the *Hallaren* and a second ship, the *Radmansoe*, Drogheda minuted that 'the concession made to Greece has broken down the principle of complete blockade' and as such 'we are going to be bombarded with a series of piece-meal suggestions to admit food through the blockade'.<sup>390</sup> The ongoing problem of the 'vague' nature of the ICRC's controls in Greece did not help matters and as such the Committee was belittled behind closed doors for its faith in German assurances of non intervention whilst 'contenting itself with the staff of a man and a boy' for supervision.<sup>391</sup>

Yet still there was a need to do something for Greece. The solution proposed was an agreement to Burckhardt's proposals for increased relief, provided that they were undertaken not by the ICRC, but by 'a body of invigilators from Sweden, Turkey, and possibly Switzerland'.<sup>392</sup> MEW in effect wished to pursue the ICRC's plans for expanded relief without the ICRC, whose own administrative body in Greece, the *Comite de Haute Direction*, composed of representatives of the Greek, Italian and German Red Cross societies, was deemed unacceptable by the Ministry.<sup>393</sup> Keen, both on humanitarian and political grounds, to expand the relief operation in Greece, both the Foreign

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<sup>389</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.476-77, 497.

<sup>390</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1223 – MEW Minutes, 17 March 1942.

<sup>391</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1235 – MEW Minutes, 4 February 1942.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid. – MEW Minutes, 4 February 1942.

<sup>393</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.464.



Office and the United States government agreed with this sentiment and on 27 February London and Washington communicated to their embassies in Stockholm a detailed plan for a co-ordinated appeal to the Swedish government and their Red Cross to take over the administration, distribution and shipping duties pertaining to the Greek relief effort.

One of the more glaring points of the plan was the blatant manner in which the ICRC was maligned. Although it was agreed that, given that it was Burckhardt's idea, the operation would have to fall under 'the general auspices of the International Red Cross Committee', the actual running of the scheme was to be handed over to the Swedes who were to form a new management commission that would by-pass the ICRC and 'report fully to His Majesty's government on all matters connected with the working of this scheme'. The telegram went on to state that this entire proposal had not yet been presented to either the Committee or the Axis occupation administration, and that 'the whole scheme should emanate from the Swedes'.<sup>394</sup>

The reasons for this approach were discussed in MEW minutes of 15 February wherein points of advantage for Swedish supervision were listed, among them being 'we assume no commitment' and 'the presence of the Swedes ought to afford us all the information we need about what goes on. If the Germans exploit the arrangement, we are at least protected against extension of similar relief to other countries'.<sup>395</sup> This point was of special importance given that MEW was still operating under the assumption that any relief effort involving the British or the ICRC would be targeted by the occupying forces for the purposes of plunder. Thus it was vital that no word get out to the

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<sup>394</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1235 – FO to Stockholm, 27 February 1942.

<sup>395</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1235 – MEW Minutes, 15 February 1942.

press – as had been the case with the *Kurtulus* – of British involvement and so a crucial part of the plan called for the Swedes to present the proposal to both Berlin and the ICRC as their own.<sup>396</sup>

The implication is clear. The British, despite assurances from Burckhardt that the *Kurtulus*' cargo had been delivered without interference, and despite the apparent breakthroughs achieved in London in December, had grown tired of the ICRC's management of the relief effort in Greece and so sought to replace them with a more Britain-friendly neutral power.<sup>397</sup> Unsurprisingly MEW was the driving force behind this idea, its argument being that though the

International Red Cross have done some excellent work, we doubt if that body itself is competent to handle a job of this size. It is also inconvenient to deal with it, because it has no government behind it and no facilities for rapid and secret communication. Moreover, it is naturally inclined to pursue its own policy, and also to engage in negotiations with Allied governments, whereas we desire to keep the strings of any permitted relief action firmly in our own hands.<sup>398</sup>

Related to the latter point was another prevalent concern that stemmed from the presence of the Italian and German Red Cross societies in the composition of the *Comite de Haute Direction* – the apparent closeness between the ICRC relief mission and the Axis occupation forces.

This apparent closeness, which had been posited by the various British prisoner of war departments since mid 1940, was naturally heightened by the fact that circumstances in Greece dictated that the ICRC had to rely more than ever on the acquiescence of the occupation forces in order to conduct its relief operations. That this situation perturbed MEW is revealed in the

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid. – Stockholm to FO, 12 March 1942.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid. – Burckhardt to Roberts, 3 December 1941.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid. – MEW to Washington, 10 July 1942.

language used in the minutes of 21 May, wherein Junod was criticised for his attempts to undermine the British scheme through the 'inadequate expedient of attaching a few Swedes to the executive body, leaving the high control in the hands of the International Red Cross and Axis'. Although the Ministry admitted that such collusion was 'from one point of view to be desired', the ICRC's 'excellent collaboration with the Axis authorities' was seen not as an achievement of diplomacy on the part of the Committee, but as further evidence of the ICRC's dubious ability to maintain good relations with the enemy.<sup>399</sup>

MEW was not beyond pursuing these suspicions. On 30 March it made a request for an investigation into 'Red Cross correspondence which throws any light on the International Red Cross being used by the enemy for exploitation of neutrals as intermediaries for the passing of information, particularly in connection with shipping intelligence'.<sup>400</sup> This was followed by a curious incident involving the mail of the ICRC's London delegation, which was always sent to Geneva via Swiss diplomatic bag, but for some unknown reason was held up for two days in late April by the British censor.<sup>401</sup>

Kit Stevens at the Foreign Office also voiced concerns about the activities of the ICRC, communicating to MEW his suspicions that the ICRC had allowed a surplus of wheat supplies intended for Greece to build up in order to sell it off for a profit.<sup>402</sup> MEW, moreover, appear to have followed up on this notion, proposing to Washington in August 1942 that a co-ordinated approach should be made to the ICRC in order to deter them from canvassing for donations in

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid. – MEW Minutes, 21 May 1942.

<sup>400</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1223 – MEW to IRB HQ, 30 March 1942.

<sup>401</sup> ICRC:D-EUR/GB1-22 – Haccius to Roberts, 29 April 1942.

<sup>402</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1236 – FO to MEW, 29 May 1942; FO to Greek Embassy in London, 15 July 1942.

Swiss Francs from individuals in the Americas, the fear being that the money was ultimately ending up in the pockets of 'persons or interests in Enemy or Occupied territories'. In actual fact the money was being used to purchase goods from within Europe – as per MEW's regulations – in order to create stockpiles of goods in Geneva. In keeping with British suspicions, the US State Department found fault even with this compliance. It was feared that the amassed supplies in Switzerland might fall into German hands.<sup>403</sup>

In all fairness to those who suspected the ICRC, the attitude of the Axis powers at this time did little to ameliorate the climate of distrust. The Italians insisted that the ICRC maintain a leadership role in the new relief arrangement with the Swedes. Indeed, it was this insistence from Rome that led to MEW agreeing to keep the ICRC in a figurehead role when it would otherwise have preferred to confine its dealings to the Swedes.<sup>404</sup>

Berlin was similarly loathe to upset the arrangement in Greece, replying to the February proposal from the Swedes that whilst it accepted the plans for increased shipping and supplies, it was unwilling to allow the *Comite de Haute Direction* to be dissolved. In addition, the Germans insisted that any further shipments should continue to be addressed not to the Swedes, but to the ICRC's delegation in Greece. The fact that Italy herself was suffering from wheat shortages at this time and indeed made plans to withhold a grain shipment in April 1942, did little to help correct the impression that the Axis

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<sup>403</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1224 – MEW to Washington, 13 August 1942; State Department to British Embassy, 28 July 1942. The MEW followed up this line via Geneva, asking the British Consulate there to raise the issue of the Committee's use of the Red Cross message system to arrange for the dispatch of food in the occupied territories – ICRC:G85/1048 – MEW to Geneva, 26 June 1942.

<sup>404</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1235 – MEW to Washington, 11 July 1942.

Red Cross services, the occupation forces and the ICRC, were working in collusion.<sup>405</sup>

The ICRC's official report is generally guarded on the issue of the British proposals, stating mildly that 'despite its readiness to co-operate with the Swedes, the Committee considered it hazardous to introduce any far reaching change into the existing arrangement.'<sup>406</sup> The report goes on to state that the Committee had to object to the British plan given that it would contravene the ICRC's principle of neutrality by involving the Swedish government in its operations. This is a highly unconvincing argument given that Edouard de Haller, the Swiss Federal Delegate for Humanitarian Affairs, was at that time serving on the board of directors of the JRC and acting as liaison between the ICRC and the Swiss government in its capacity as Protecting Power.<sup>407</sup>

The flimsiness of this argument did not mean, however, that the ICRC was protecting some form of conspiratorial relationship with the Axis administration to seize relief supplies. The ICRC's, and in particular Burckhardt's, objective in resisting the Swedish proposal was only to protect the Committee's reputation and maintain a presence in Greece that would help lay the foundation for more expansive relief operations elsewhere.

For their part, the reluctance of the Axis to upset the status quo reflected more their own indifference and unwillingness to improve conditions in Greece, rather than any particular fondness for the ICRC. The fact that even after the Swedes were put in charge large quantities of relief supplies – estimated by some to be up to 40% of that which was received – were still

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<sup>405</sup> ICRC:G85/1048 – Livingston to Burckhardt, 7 April 1942; Medicott, *Blockade*, vol.2, p.265.

<sup>406</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.462.

<sup>407</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.494; ICRC:CO2/1.935 – Minutes of ICRC Meeting, 19 January 1942.

going “missing” supports this argument.<sup>408</sup> Another point to consider is that the style of the ICRC’s work in Greece was hardly conducive to collaboration with the Axis. The efficiency of Brunel in working for British interests and the maverick actions of delegates like Andre Lambert would hardly have been needed had relations between the ICRC and the occupation forces been as close as the British presumed.<sup>409</sup>

Furthermore, it should be emphasised that the Italian government had a long history of poor relations with the ICRC, dating back to Rome’s use of mustard gas on civilians and repeated bombing of Red Cross hospitals during the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935-36.<sup>410</sup> This evident contempt for the neutrality of the Red Cross was further demonstrated by the Italians during the invasion and occupation of Greece. In a repeat of the attacks in Ethiopia, in November 1940 and May 1941 Italian planes deliberately bombed Greek Red Cross hospitals at Larissa and Jannia. This was followed by an even more heinous act in June 1942, when a squadron of Italian dive bombers torpedoed and sank the clearly marked JRC vessel *Stureborg*, an action which led to the loss of tonnes of relief supplies and the death of all but one of the crew, including the ICRC’s escorting agent, Richard Heider.<sup>411</sup> These attacks were hardly the actions of a collaborative partner of the ICRC, which – with the urging of the British – was quick to launch a protest to Rome over the *Stureborg* sinking.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1214 – Washington to MEW, 27 March 1943. Refugees from Greece who had arrived in Egypt in early 1943 estimated that up to 40% of supplies were still being requisitioned by the occupation forces for the benefit of the army. The MEW confirmed later that same year that supplies of wheat and pulse were still being ‘pilfered’ – TNA:PRO FO 837/1215 – Lord Selbourne to Archbishop of Canterbury, 1 June 1943.

<sup>409</sup> See Chapter 1, p.90-91.

<sup>410</sup> See Baudendistel, *Bombs and Good Intentions*, chs.4 and 6.

<sup>411</sup> It was agreed by both the Axis and the Allies that the *Stureborg* had veered 30 miles off course, yet it was still clearly marked with Red Cross emblems – TNA:PRO FO 836/1231 – Naval Cipher to C in C Mediterranean – 12 July 1942; *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.65.

<sup>412</sup> The British aim was to deflect criticism of their blockade policies by highlighting the brutality of the Italians – TNA:PRO FO 837/1236 – FO to Cairo, 6 July 1942; FO to Geneva, 22 July 1942.

Despite their knowledge of these incidents, the fact that so many relief consignments had gone missing on the ICRC's watch continued to affect British perceptions of the Committee's relations with the Axis. A report received in April by Eden from Victor Mallet, the British minister in Stockholm, did little to change this view. Mallet reported that the ICRC 'had now excellent collaboration with the Axis authorities, largely owing to the advice given the *Comite de Haute Direction* by the Italian and German Red Cross representatives thereon'.<sup>413</sup> This direct implication of the influence of Axis Red Cross societies on the ICRC's managing commission served only further to polarise the issue in the eyes of the British, who increasingly began to see the Swedes and themselves allied on one side against Berlin and Geneva on the other. The British had quite simply run out of trust and patience with the ICRC's Greek operation.

The Swedes by contrast were viewed, erroneously according to the British Naval Attaché in Stockholm, as being both firmly anti-German and, as an untested commodity in Greece, well positioned to serve British interests. The British invitation for Stockholm to become involved, therefore, was in keeping with Whitehall's general 'wish to get as much co-operation as possible out of the Swedes and of getting them to deny as much as possible to the Germans'.

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<sup>413</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1235 – Mallet to Eden, 30 April 1942.

<sup>414</sup> According to Henry Denham, the British Naval Attaché in Stockholm, the Swedes did not truly believe that Germany would be defeated until the end of 1942, and so continued to favour Berlin over London until that time – Henry Denham, *Inside The Nazi Ring: A Naval Attaché in Sweden 1940-1945* (London, 1984), pp.55-56. The Allies for their part, continued to put pressure on Stockholm, which let the Germans transport troops and materiel via Sweden into Norway until 29 July 1943 – Christian Leitz, *Nazi Germany and Neutral Europe During the Second World War*, (Manchester, 2000), pp.59-63.

This was not the only advantage of the Swedish option. The acquisition of valuable neutral Swedish vessels – of which there were many laying dormant in Baltic ports – was also very important for building a relief fleet on which the British felt they could rely.<sup>415</sup> This advantage gelled nicely with the over-riding aim of the British to remove the ICRC from a position of authority in Greece. This rejection of the Committee, built upon the foundation of frustrating negotiations and distrust of its supervisory work, also contained elements of the usual criticisms levelled at Geneva by the British – the amateurism of its delegates; the independence of thought and movement; and the Committee's seemingly incessant habit of taking on more than it could handle.<sup>416</sup>

The irony of this was that such assertiveness on the part of the ICRC was spurred on more than anything by MEW's repeated attempts to restrict its efforts. It had been MEW's lack of response to written appeals throughout 1941 that had prompted Burckhardt's visit and the presentation of his proposals for increased shipping. As the sluggish negotiations over these proposals dragged on into spring the Ministry's obstinacy continued to eclipse what in December looked like a new dawn for British-ICRC relations. When, in May, more reports were received from Greece of starvation amongst the populace, the ICRC launched a fresh round of appeals and plans. One such scheme, aimed specifically at satisfying MEW's concerns, was for the establishment of camps in Greece to feed children under Red Cross supervision. Both this idea and a subsequent appeal for additional shipments of food to be sent from Trieste to Piraeus, were met with refusals by MEW.<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1231 – War Cabinet Minutes, 14 February 1942. There were 21 Swedish vessels used during the war. In total they made 94 voyages and transported 712,000 tonnes of goods – *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.479; Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.498.

<sup>416</sup> TNA:PRO FO – 837/1235 – MEW to Washington, 11 July 1942.

<sup>417</sup> TNA:PRO FO – 837/1236 – MEW to FO, 10 June 1942; Camps Minute, 7 May 1942; Cairo to FO, 27 May 1942.



The same was true of the Committee's appeal of 12 March for a shipment of Canadian wheat. This appeal was met by prevarication from MEW, which demanded exact details of the extent of the starvation before agreeing to the proposal, provided of course that the Swedes be involved. So time consuming were these negotiations that the three Swedish ships carrying the wheat did not leave Montreal until 21 July, only two days before an agreement was reached on the issue of the White Ships.<sup>418</sup>

The effects of these prolonged negotiations were felt hardest on the ground where Robert Brunel, having witnessed the tragedy of Greece first-hand, summed up the Committee's noble, yet overly simplistic, view by commenting bitterly that 'the Anglo-Americans should know better than to tighten the restrictions on the blockade when we're doing such good work'.<sup>419</sup> In the pursuit of this 'good work' on behalf of Greece and, moreover, in defiance of MEW's interests, the ICRC enjoyed success, albeit at the expense of casualties. In addition to the Greek nurses killed during Italian air raids and the crew of the *Stureborg*, Robert Brunel also lost his life during the course of the Greek relief effort. Suffering from fatigue and exhaustion, Brunel was invalided back to Switzerland in 1943 where on 16 June, he finally died, having quite literally worked himself to death in an effort to bring succour to Greece. It is little wonder that upon hearing of his demise flags across the war-torn country were flown at half mast and the Municipal Council of Athens saw fit to name a street in the capital after him.<sup>420</sup>

Had Brunel lived, he would have seen the foundations he laid in 1941 supporting what by the time of Greece's liberation in October 1944 had

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<sup>418</sup> ICRC Report, vol.3, pp.463-467

<sup>419</sup> ICRC:G3/27C/147 – Report of Greek delegation, 5 May 1942.

<sup>420</sup> ICRC Report, vol.1, p.66; Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.502.

become the ICRC's greatest wartime triumph. The crucial 45,435 tonnes of food shipped under the auspices of the *Committee de Haute Direction* was eclipsed by the tonnage shipped under the new Managing Commission – as the Swedish/ICRC enterprise became known – which between September 1942 and April 1945 amounted to 712,000 tonnes of food, clothing and medical supplies.<sup>421</sup> Given that it was the British and the Americans who insisted on Swedish involvement, which admittedly brought with it the necessary tonnage to better the relief effort, it is tempting to cast the Foreign Office and those who supported its scheme as the architects of this success. This, however, would be misguided.

The interests of the British in occupied Greece were threefold: quelling of public criticism; preservation of her POWs; and relief for the civilian population. I list these in order of Whitehall's consideration. Compared with France, the POW problem was small and so was considered more an opportunity to assuage public criticism than a true cause for concern. The civilian problem, far greater than that of the POWs, was heavily influenced by the pressure of public criticism over the blockade, particularly from the United States where figures of standing advocated throughout 1941-42 that concessions be made to Greece.<sup>422</sup> There was also genuine empathy in some British quarters, particularly in the cases of Sir Knatchbull-Hugessen and Oliver Lyttelton. Sympathy, however, had its limits and those were imposed by MEW, which was as determined to maintain the blockade's integrity around Greece as the Foreign Office was to break it down.<sup>423</sup> In an effort to resolve

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<sup>421</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.459, 479.

<sup>422</sup> Beaumont, 'Starving for Democracy', pp.66-67.

<sup>423</sup> The entries in Hugh Dalton's diary for 5 January and 9 June 1942 best exemplify this division in Whitehall particularly between Eden and Dalton. Though this resistance from the MEW continued throughout 1942, it was Dalton's view that by February 1943 his more moderate successor at the MEW, Lord Selbourne, had taken to Eden's line with regards to limiting the blockade – Dalton, *Diary*, 13 February 1943, p.340, 456, 553.

this division a compromise was reached – increased shipping to Greece to keep the Foreign Office happy and a change of staff to supervise its distribution to satisfy MEW.

In terms of a response to the crisis in Greece the solution was admirable in that it indicated a realisation in Whitehall that something needed to be done despite the determined resistance of MEW. In saying this, however, it must be stressed that this action was only taken by the British under pressure from public scrutiny and, after Greece had starved for a little over half a year, during which time Brunel and Burckhardt had supplied the British with plenty of information on the scope of the disaster and plans – often specifically aimed at satisfying MEW's requirements – of how best to deal with the situation.

The lethargy of the British response to Geneva's efforts and urgings on the matter indicate that the distrust that was forged over the problems in France in 1940 had abated little despite the best efforts of the ICRC. This in turn, led to a natural resistance in Whitehall to the Committee's proposals. When the British did decide to act, the Committee, although not entirely removed from operations in Greece, was forced by Whitehall's scheme into an arrangement that, once implemented, proved disruptive to its on-going relief efforts throughout the first half of 1942.<sup>424</sup> Moreover, and detrimental to British-ICRC relations, the British proposals callously dismissed the ICRC's prior achievements conducted under its own auspices and without outside influence. These included the organisation of POW parcel distribution and overland transportation routes through the Balkans to Greece; creation of the

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<sup>424</sup> The mid year report on the ICRC concluded that although the belligerent governments had allowed some life-saving shipments through, the irregularity of the shipments meant that conditions in Greece had actually worsened since February 1942 – TNA:PRO FO 837/1237 – ICRC Report on General Situation in Greece, undated August 1942.

JRC to increase relief efforts across Europe; formation of the White Ships and Transport Foundation as a practical means of assuring this increase; and, perhaps most notably, a welcome realisation that changes in its style of operations would be required in order to achieve success in the face of the escalating conflict. The use of caiques to service the Greek islands, often in defiance of both blockade regulations and the wishes of the Axis administration, stands as an excellent example of this more inventive attitude.<sup>425</sup> Whilst these efforts are widely applauded by historians, it is seldom emphasised that these were made under the shadow of British attempts to either resist or control the ICRC's plans.

### **EXPANSION, INNOVATION AND RESTRICTION**

Why did Whitehall decide to interject itself so significantly into the ICRC's Greek operation? The obvious, and most widely touted, reason was that the British were concerned by the on-going seizure of relief goods by the Axis forces in Greece, a fact that cannot be denied. The British had every right to be wary of the ICRC's ability to supervise distribution. However, as was so often the case in British-ICRC relations, Whitehall was quick to single out the Committee as the primary cause of the problem, viewing its delegates either as poor supervisors or Axis sympathisers. This view was formed at the expense of basic logic which dictated that the ICRC was a non-government relief organisation operating in a country under the occupation of troops who, by the nature of their empowered position, could and did take what they wanted. Despite what the British thought, no amount of administrative rearrangement in Greece on the part of Whitehall, Washington or Stockholm was going to change that fact.

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<sup>425</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.460.

It is true that seizures of imported goods were reduced under the Swedish-run Managing Commission. However, if one bears in mind the increase in partisan activity in Greece from early 1943 onwards, it seems more likely that the reduction in plundering was related to the fact that the occupation troops were preoccupied with an increasingly unwinnable guerrilla war in the Peloponnesian Mountains.<sup>426</sup> However, although they may have disrupted the Axis troops' plans to plunder, neither partisans nor the presence of the Managing Commission prevented the theft of goods altogether.

From late 1942 until the retreat of the Germans from Greece in October 1944, Red Cross parcels and meagre local produce were still being seized in notable quantities for transport back to Germany and Italy.<sup>427</sup> This fact ran contrary to MEW's lofty expectations that 'the Swedes will probably be able to stop the Germans stealing the wheat' or, at the very least 'afford us all the information which we need about what goes on'.<sup>428</sup> This opinion was founded on little but prejudice against the ICRC's delegation, which the British, unreasonably and erroneously, saw as inferior in terms of its reliability and forcefulness, compared with the similarly neutral Swedes.

This need to improve the security of the Greek relief effort was only part of the reason for the British government's interference. If one looks at the aftermath of the Managing Commission's creation in August 1942 and the wider scope of British-ICRC relations from that time onwards, it becomes apparent that British insistence on involving the Swedes in Greece was but

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<sup>426</sup> The Greek People's Liberation Army, or ELAS, began organised resistance against the Axis occupation in mid 1942. Attacks on Italian troops increased over the course of the winter and by spring 1943 the ELAS had massed its forces in the Peloponnesian Mountains, where it effectively ruled. This led the Axis occupation forces to both demand more troops and recruit anti-communist militia for the purposes of fighting the ELAS – Mazower, *Hitler's Greece*, pp.123-133, 172, see ch.21 generally for ELAS history.

<sup>427</sup> Medicott, *Blockade*, vol.2, pp.273-275.

<sup>428</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1235 – MEW Minutes, 15 February 1942.

one factor in a wider-reaching effort to restrict the influence and independence of the ICRC, in particular with regards to its new fleet.

As early as 6 August – that is, only a week after agreement had been begrudgingly reached on the question of the Transport Foundation and the White Ships – W.A. Camps at MEW raised the old fear that in expanding its fleet the 'IRC were probably acting under pressure from the German and Italian authorities'. Moreover, he doubted 'whether the company [Transport Foundation] will bring any advantage to the British Red Cross', given that 'the chief preoccupation of the International Committee is to get space for transport of goods for non-British prisoners'.<sup>429</sup> This sentiment was echoed by representatives of the Ministry of Transport and the Foreign Office, which raised concern over whether the ICRC was increasing its own fleet at the expense of the BRC's vessels that delivered British POW parcels from Lisbon to Marseilles.<sup>430</sup>

Clearly Whitehall viewed the creation of the White Ships, rather than being a welcome means of securing supply lines, as a move by the ICRC to expand its relief effort to other areas – ones which did not directly concern the welfare of British POWs. In addition to being yet another expression of Whitehall's flawed view of the ICRC as a servant of Britain, this opinion was also deeply at odds with the goals of the Committee's expansion in 1942. The political motivations for this expansion will be covered in the next chapter. For now it is enough to say that under Burckhardt's emerging leadership the ICRC began a campaign from mid 1942 onwards both to improve relations with the British and work to closer with them than it had in the past.

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<sup>429</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1224 – MEW to PWD, 6 August 1942.

<sup>430</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/333 – Minutes of Interdepartmental Meeting, 13 August 1942.

This campaign began in the aftermath of Burckhardt and Odier's meetings in London in December 1941, from which Burckhardt concluded that the strained character of British-ICRC relations was an issue that needed to be addressed.

<sup>431</sup> Having reviewed Burckhardt's findings, Jacques Chenevière proposed that the London delegation – 'a post of the highest possible importance' – needed to be strengthened. Accordingly, the Committee chose to send the delegate Horace de Pourtales, a consummate English speaker, to work alongside Haccius in London.<sup>432</sup> He was later joined by another delegate, Nicholas Burckhardt (no relation to Carl), who, when in need of a recall to Geneva for personal reasons in February 1943, was replaced by Jean Cellierier.<sup>433</sup>

The ICRC, therefore, was determined both to strengthen and to maintain the presence of its delegation in London. This was hardly the action of an organisation that was seeking to distance itself from British interests, which, Burckhardt made clear in his letter to Lord Drogheda on 19 August, would be best served by Whitehall's acquiescence in the Transport Foundation's plans for expansion.<sup>434</sup> It was this issue – key for the evolution of the ICRC's operations – that the British were made to consider during the summer of 1942. The conclusions Whitehall reached on this matter had a lasting impact on British-ICRC relations.

In terms of these relations, Whitehall's interdepartmental meetings in August were a grim affair. Of those present only Walter Roberts and his colleagues at the Foreign Office appear to have truly appreciated the ICRC's rationale for expansion. Roberts – having perhaps succumbed to Burckhardt's charm

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<sup>431</sup> ICRC:D/EUR/GB1-56 – Burckhardt's Report on Visit to London, 19 February 1942.

<sup>432</sup> ICRC:C14 – Minutes of ICRC meeting, 2 February 1942.

<sup>433</sup> ICRC:G85/1049 – Chenevière to Norton, 22 February 1943.

<sup>434</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/333 – Burckhardt to Drogheda, 19 August 1942.

during the latter's recent visit to London – stated that both the ICRC and the PWD considered that all Allied prisoners should be treated the same as Imperial troops. This view effectively opposed Whitehall's policy on POW relief in favour of supporting Burckhardt's argument that the ICRC could serve both British and non-British POWs. The Foreign Office's general conclusions went a step further by expressing the rather catty opinion that the ICRC was

a body of high-minded people concerned mainly with humanitarian projects and they (FO) feel that the fleet scheme springs from this motive and is not (as suspected by the Ministry of Economic Warfare) the result of pressure from enemy powers.

Despite this support, reservations amongst others in Whitehall remained. One view, shared by the Admiralty and the Ministry of Transport, was that the ICRC was manoeuvring to absorb the BRC's modest fleet of merchant vessels. The Ministry of Transport's G.D. Frazer went so far as to claim that a campaign to discredit the BRC's vessels on the grounds that they had insufficient marking and lighting had been invented to further the ICRC's aims.<sup>435</sup>

In fact, the Italian Control Committee had made protests in early 1941 about the size and marking of the BRC vessels. Although the BRC thought these complaints were only a 'pretext to cause trouble', it joined the British government in using the issue of inadequate ships' markings to blame the ICRC for attacks along the Lisbon-Marseille route in 1944.<sup>436</sup> This hypocritical reaction was a logical culmination of the simmering grievances first aired by the various government departments in August 1942. In general, these grievances centred on the fear that in agreeing to the ICRC's proposals the

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid. – Minutes of Interdepartmental Meeting, 13 August 1942.

<sup>436</sup> *BRC Report*, vol.1, pp.366-367. The details of these attacks on the *Embla* and the *Cristina* will be detailed in chapter 4.



British would forfeit control of the Lisbon-Marseilles route to an entity that, unlike the BRC, had concerns beyond the welfare of British POWs. Mindful of the fact that the Committee was still needed to bring succour to British internees, the Ministry of Transport suggested that, as a show of 'goodwill', it would back a proposal to grant the ICRC one ship – to be run of course, by the BRC'.<sup>437</sup>

This suggestion was clarified at the 21 August meeting, at which it was proposed that a Danish vessel, the *Nancy*, be released to the ICRC to be used along the Lisbon-Marseilles route – effectively to bolster BRC shipping operations, not the White Ships. Tellingly, this scheme was only backed by Whitehall on the proviso that the money paid for the *Nancy* would be held in a blocked Swiss bank account and that the 'ship would be used principally in the first place to reduce the accumulation of supplies already around Lisbon for Imperial Prisoners of War'. All other Allied prisoners, however, would have to wait for 'some future date' before being granted the same service.<sup>438</sup>

Clearly, despite Roberts' minority view, little had changed in terms of Whitehall's perceptions on shipping since the parcel crisis of 1940-41. In October 1942 the War Office's W.H. Gardner echoed the same fears expressed by George Warner over two years beforehand when he wrote that 'if we surrender the BRCS fleet and place ourselves entirely in the hands of the IRC for shipping, our whole programme for servicing British prisoners is likely to be seriously prejudiced'.<sup>439</sup> Similarly, MEW felt that in addition to possibly diverting supplies from British POWs, any resulting increase in the

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<sup>437</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/333 – Minutes of Interdepartmental Meeting 13 August 1942.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid. – Minutes of Interdepartmental Meeting, 21 August 1942.

<sup>439</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/334 – WO to PWD, 19 October 1942.

flow of goods to French POWs would be of further detriment to the blockade, given that security arrangements in France were still deemed unacceptable.<sup>440</sup>

In the face of this resistance, approval for the release of the *Nancy* was not given until 14 November, almost three months after the matter was first raised. Even then, the usually supportive Foreign Office still felt that 'a cautious attitude' needed to be maintained towards the Committee's Transport Foundation and, despite Whitehall's agreement on the *Nancy*, it was still 'anxious to guide the initiative of the International Red Cross into convenient channels'.<sup>441</sup> In blunter language: it wanted to control the actions of the ICRC for British benefit.

Although approval for the release of the *Nancy* was given in November, conditions of operation were still proving unsatisfactory to the British. They had been wary from the outset of responsibility for the cost of upkeep of the White Ships vessels.<sup>442</sup> When it was discovered that the running costs for the *Nancy* – to be paid by the BRC whose funds it was felt would be better spent on packing parcels for British POWs – would be 'unduly onerous', the negotiations over the release of the vessel were broken off. This obfuscating, flawed dialogue by the British in relation to the ICRC's shipping expansion proved to be its last of note until the war's final months. As with the debates over blockade relaxation, the British had simply had enough and in February 1943 MEW decided that its official policy was to offer 'no encouragement in general terms' for the White Ships and instead only to 'consider a particular

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid. – MEW to PWD, 14 October 1942.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid. – FO to Washington, 14 November 1942.

<sup>442</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/333 – ICRC Shipping Memo, undated, August 1942. Owing to its location within the file, it is likely this memo was written and circulated sometime between 1 and 6 August.

proposal for the company to acquire a particular ship for a particular purpose’.

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With regard to the goals of the ICRC expanding its fleet, the release of the *Nancy* would have meant little anyway as the clear intention of the British, even before MEW reached its stark conclusion, was not to assist the Committee in improving the scope of its parcel delivery, but to ensure above all else, that British and Imperial troops remained well supplied. Even so, the negotiations over the *Nancy* were still very important in terms of British-ICRC relations in that they outlined in the broadest possible terms the conflicting intentions of Geneva and Whitehall on the question of the White Ships. Given how crucial this issue was in shaping British-ICRC relations, the question must be asked, were the views of each party justified?

Looking at the wider context of the ICRC’s work during 1942-43, the British policy of protecting their own appears both overzealous and unreasonable. At the time of the *Nancy* negotiations the ICRC’s primary area of operations – the despatch of parcels to POWs – was stable and, in some theatres, thriving. The annual number of parcels received and despatched from Switzerland during that year reached its wartime height of 14,690,625 and, more importantly, the parcels were now reaching prisoners in places that had previously been almost impossible to supply.<sup>444</sup> The operation to supply the Greek islands and the introduction of collective parcels for French POWs detailed in the previous chapters were two of the more notable areas of expansion.

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<sup>443</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1214 – MEW Note on Blockade Policy, 14 February 1943.

<sup>444</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.11.

There were also improvements for those British POWs who had endured the privations of 1940-41, given that Eden's two-year old pledge to delivery 'one parcel, per week, per man' was finally being delivered at places like Stalag Luft III (Sagan).<sup>445</sup> Even in Dulag Luft, the source of so much difficulty in 1940-41, parcels were being received regularly by September 1942.<sup>446</sup> MI9, the British agency responsible for POW escape and evasion, also benefited from this stability. Although its chief, Colonel Norman Crockett, declared Red Cross parcels 'absolutely sacrosanct', MI9 had no issue with using the ICRC's efficient delivery infrastructure to send bogus relief parcels containing escape equipment and maps into the camps.<sup>447</sup>

These improvements and benefits were the result of stable supply lines which the White Ships were intended above all to maintain. The reason why these supply lines needed constant reappraisal and expansion was that their ability to operate – like all facets of the ICRC's activities – was dictated in no small part by the variability of the war. The way this variability affected the shipping lanes will be examined at length in another chapter, but it is worth noting here that without the stability given to parcel supply lines in 1942 several crises in POW relief may not have been averted.

The first of these crises was that, owing to an increasing lack of general resources within the Reich, material conditions within POW camps and the standard of their upkeep began steadily to decline from mid 1942 onwards.<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> TNA:PRO WO 224/63 – MOC Report to Protecting Power, 13 August 1942.

<sup>446</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/18490 – ICRC Report on Dulag Luft and *Lazaret*, 16 September 1942, 4 March 1943.

<sup>447</sup> These parcels were not marked 'Red Cross', but were delivered by the ICRC's transport infrastructure – M.R.D Foot and J.M Langley, *MI9: Escape and Evasion, 1939-1945* (Boston, 1979), pp.97-98.

<sup>448</sup> Vourkoutiotis, 'What the Angels Saw', p.705.

One of the more severe manifestations of this problem was a result of the OKW's decision during spring 1942 to cut POW rations to match those of the German civilian population. The ICRC's camp inspectors estimated that this left some groups of POWs dependent on Red Cross parcels for 60% of their daily calorie intake.<sup>449</sup>

Owing to the improvements made to the ICRC and the BRC's operations what once may have been a serious problem was generally well handled. In August 1942 production by the BRC was increased by an extra 20,000 parcels per week over the course of twenty-six weeks. Having learnt from its unpreparedness in 1940-41, the War Office also showed some foresight on this issue, advocating that the BRC's scale of production be maintained until June 1943, by which time the surplus had grown to approximately 200,000 parcels.<sup>450</sup> When it came time for the ICRC to manage this increase in shipping it had the flexibility of the White Ships to rely on. When transport moved onto the continent the Committee's efforts were similarly characterised by an efficiency and ingenuity it had lacked in 1940-41.

In July 1942 for example, the ICRC's warehouses in Lisbon began to overflow with parcels. Faced with this problem the Committee acquired 16 trains, each comprising 20 to 25 wagons, to shift the supplies overland to Marseilles. The result of such enterprise was that by the end of 1942 the parcel stockpile in Geneva had grown so large that the ICRC had to commission the construction of a new 6,600 square metre storehouse at La Renfile. This new storehouse was in addition to the already over-burdened 6,000 square metre facility at Vallorbe that had been procured by the Committee in November 1941.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, pp.254-55.

<sup>450</sup> *BRC Report*, vol.1, pp.269-270.

<sup>451</sup> TNA:PRO WO 916/333 – Geneva to FO, 28 July 1942. The use of the trains proved a successful stop-gap measure whilst additional shipping was being negotiated with the MEW – Durand,

These facilities, combined with an impressive monthly average of between 1,000 and 1,200 wagons of parcels being sent into Germany, meant that few British POWs suffered from a lack of parcels over the winter of 1942-43.<sup>452</sup> This achievement was especially notable given that from October 1942 until the New Year merchant shipping in the western Mediterranean was significantly disrupted by Allied military operations in North Africa.<sup>453</sup> The foresight of the Committee and the BRC made sure that, unlike 1940-41, the escalation of hostilities in Red Cross transportation zones had a minimal effect on parcel delivery.

This stability should have made two things clear to the British. Firstly, the expansion of the ICRC's operations in no way engendered a situation in which 'the whole programme for servicing British prisoners might seriously be harmed'.<sup>454</sup> The opposite, in fact, was true. Secondly, although problems still occurred from time to time, the ICRC in general shouldered its increasing burdens well and demonstrated that, despite ongoing concerns about its capabilities, both the Committee's delegates and its leadership were handling the challenge of expanding operations in as efficient a manner as could be expected given Geneva's limitations. An example of how the ICRC was able to bring much needed fluidity to these limitations and, conversely, how resistant Whitehall was to such innovation, can be seen in the creation of the Concentration Camp Parcel Scheme (CCPS).

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*Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.481; *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.239.

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid*, vol.1, pp.168-69. One notable exception to this rule was Oflag IVC (Colditz), where the prisoners did not receive their 'one parcel, per man, per week' promise until mid 1943. Even so, the inmates were far from suffering, as over the summer of 1942 the camp MOC reported that each man still received approximate  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a parcel each week – TNA:PRO WO 224/69 – ICRC Report on Oflag IVC, 3 July 1942; Berne to FO, 2 June 1942; ICRC to ICRC London, 14 June 1943.

<sup>453</sup> The intensification of battle in this region led to the Portuguese government forbidding any of its merchant ships to call at Mediterranean ports – ICRC Report, vol.3, p.159.

<sup>454</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/334 – FO to Berne, 31 October 1942.

Under the terms of the Committee's agreement with the Allies, parcels, either for POWs or civilian internees, were only permitted to pass through the blockade if the names and addresses of the recipient were known and a Red Cross delegate was on hand at the camp to distribute them. Whilst these requirements were more often than not met in POW camps, for political prisoners of the Reich the situation was more complicated.<sup>455</sup> This was owing to Hitler's *Nacht und Nebel* decree of 7 December 1941, which declared that no information on the fate or location of captured 'communistic elements and other circles hostile towards Germany' was to be given to the outside world.<sup>456</sup> The all-important names for those "enemies of the Reich" incarcerated under these measures were, therefore, thin on the ground.

The ICRC's response to this problem was one of the most adroit and creative of the entire war. The innovation came from one of Burckhardt's closest allies in the Committee, Jean de Schwarzenberg, whom the former had made head of the newly created CCPS in July 1943. In the months prior to the organisation being made official Schwarzenberg had pioneered a system whereby each parcel in a delivery run had an attached receipt on which additional prisoners' names and addresses could be written before being sent back to Geneva for onward transmission. As Schwarzenberg himself admitted, 'it was something of an adventure, since we were departing from the traditional basis of our work as defined by the Conventions'.<sup>457</sup>

This unorthodox method led to the positive identification of many more prisoners and subsequently, a need to expand the ICRC's capacity to deliver

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<sup>455</sup> POW camps holding Soviet prisoners were exempt from this agreement.

<sup>456</sup> 'The Nacht Und Nebel Decree', 7 December 1941 – *Project Avalon*, Yale: Lillian Goldman Law Library, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/I-90.asp> (accessed 4 May 2007).

<sup>457</sup> Favez, *Holocaust*, p.95, citing Schwarzenberg Memoir in ICRC/G3/26F/DAS.

parcels into these camps. By the end of the war the CCPS had delivered 1,112,000 parcels to concentration camp inmates, many of whom would have perished without the crucial supplementation to their increasingly meagre rations.<sup>458</sup> As an example of how the much-feared notion of ICRC/Axis collaboration could be used beneficially, the part played by the German camp authorities in getting the scheme off the ground should be noted.

Much of the scheme's early success was due to Roland Marti's ability successfully to negotiate with camp commandants and higher ranking Gestapo for concessions for collective parcel delivery at the Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen and Ravensbruck camps. These agreements were not always held sacrosanct. By 1944, however, similar arrangements had been agreed to in principle by camp authorities at Dachau, Natzweiler, Buchenwald and Stutthof. Amazingly, there were some instances in which the German authorities actually helped the ICRC by forwarding parcels intended for those who had been transferred to other camps.<sup>459</sup>

Although initially the Committee was able to procure supplies from Eastern European countries from within the blockade, the need for greater quantities of supplies grew as the scheme broadened.<sup>460</sup> The ICRC's delegate in Washington, Alfred Zollinger, anticipated this eventuality and in August 1943 sent a plea to MEW for supplies for the burgeoning CCPS. In reply Zollinger was told that although the Ministry realised 'that these prisoners are suffering exceptional privation and in many cases must deserve exceptional sympathy',

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<sup>458</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, pp.335-336.

<sup>459</sup> Favez, *Holocaust*, p. 96; Meir Wagner, *The Righteous of Switzerland: Heroes of the Holocaust*, ed. Andreas C. Fischer and Graham Buik (Hoboken, 2001), pp.218-220.

<sup>460</sup> Most of these were countries allied to the Third Reich such as Hungary, Romania and Slovakia – *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.336.



it would have to give him a 'particularly painful' refusal.<sup>461</sup> This comparison of attitudes is not to suggest that the Germans showed greater compassion for the plight of concentration camp internees than the Allies – the Germans were, after all, their jailers. Whitehall's obstinacy does suggest, however, that as late as 1943 the British opinion of the blockade as vital was still proving to be a thorn in the side of the ICRC's plans to expand its relief operations.

The fact that the ICRC's mandate had been altered beyond the scope of the Geneva Convention was, for an organisation so often accused of hesitancy and inflexibility, a great step forward. Typically, as in most instances of ICRC expansion, the natural British reaction was to attempt to make the Committee take two steps back. In the case of the rejection of Zollinger's CCPS appeal, there were two important factors in play in this rejection. The first was that Zollinger may have already blotted his copybook with MEW in June when he candidly suggested to Drogheda that as the Vichy authorities had been good enough to allow shipments for British POWs through their ports, the British should be more flexible in granting navicerts for shipments destined for French POWs.<sup>462</sup>

Another, more decisive factor was the timing of the appeal. As Schwarzenberg's scheme began the ICRC was already in the midst of a campaign to have MEW lift the blockade around Belgium in order to send milk and medical supplies to children. As with so many other proposed initiatives, the Committee received a rejection letter in reply.<sup>463</sup> Yet the fact that the scheme was backed by influential figures in the United States, meant that

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<sup>461</sup> ICRC:G85/1048 – MEW to Zollinger, 18 August 1943.

<sup>462</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/613 – Minutes of Zollinger meeting with Drogheda, 16 June 1943.

<sup>463</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1214 – MEW to Burckhardt, 1 July 1943.

MEW received a barrage of bad publicity and increasing pressure from Washington over the issue throughout 1943 and 1944.

Despite this and despite MEW admitting internally in April 1943 that its dogmatic attitude to the blockade was one of 'growing embarrassment', Whitehall's official policy was that the blockade still needed to be maintained as stringently as possible.<sup>464</sup> The Ministry's clearly dismissive and frustrated attitude with the ICRC during late 1943 suggests that the part played by the Committee in drawing the attention of Washington and other Allied governments to the blockade issue was not appreciated by MEW.

In September the ICRC's appeals for concessions to ship medical supplies to wounded and sick military personnel – received favourably by the United States blockading authorities – initially failed even to garner a response from the Ministry.<sup>465</sup> When responses were given, MEW officials could scarcely conceal their exasperation. This was particularly evident in the impatient tone Drogheda took in his correspondence with Burckhardt and MEW's note to the US Embassy that it no longer had any intention of 'entering into any detailed argument' with the ICRC on the matter of relief for Belgium.<sup>466</sup> This resentment was crowned by the new trade agreement brokered between the blockading authorities and the Swiss government in December 1943, which included a clause stating that the Swiss were not to approve any more exports on behalf of the ICRC without the prior agreement of the Allies.<sup>467</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> Medlicott, *Blockade*, vol.2, pp.612-614. There was also pressure from the émigré Allied governments based in London – TNA:PRO FO 837/1214 – MEW Minute, 11 April 1943.

<sup>465</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.129.

<sup>466</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1225 – Drogheda to Burckhardt, 16 November 1943; MEW to US Embassy, 6 October 1943.

<sup>467</sup> Medlicott, *Blockade*, vol.2, pp.514-515. For further details see *JRC Report*, pp.20-26.

If one looks at the Committee's CCPS proposals with this background in mind, it becomes clear that the British attitude was, rather than the result of callousness or indifference, about context and experience. Having endured a constant barrage of ICRC initiatives since 1940 – most of which had, from MEW's point of view, produced nothing but headaches and disruptions to its goal of maintaining the blockade – the Ministry had emerged with a palpable dislike and distrust of the Committee. This attitude had been exacerbated when MEW lost its battle with other government departments over its plans to scuttle the Committee's White Ships. The fact that the approval for the White Ships had, as one MEW staffer predicted, given 'rise to demands for relief action to which we cannot consent', served to confirm the Ministry's suspicions that expansion of the ICRC could only lead to trouble, both in terms of publicity and blockade integrity.<sup>468</sup>

Some of MEW's rejections were reasonable. The ICRC's scheme to have ships sailing the Lisbon-Marseilles route call at smaller Portuguese ports to load supplies, was quite rightly viewed by the Ministry as serving only to further complicate security and control measures.<sup>469</sup> Had this suggestion been raised, rejected and then forgotten it is likely that MEW would not have been so incensed. As the ICRC's own post-war report admits, however, schemes of this nature were continually put forward and, when met with rejection from MEW, 'the Committee refused to take these restrictions as final'.<sup>470</sup>

This stubbornness, born both of the ICRC's conflicting aims with the Ministry and its inability to force issues by any other means, was perhaps ill-advised. Despite engendering occasional success, the Committee's attitude served

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<sup>468</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/333 – Camps to Roberts, 6 August 1942.

<sup>469</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/334 – MEW to FO, 23 November 1942.

<sup>470</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.28.

primarily to confirm Whitehall's impressions of the ICRC as meddlesome. As a result, MEW was understandably loathe to throw its support behind the CCPS which, despite its noble cause, was viewed as little more than yet another one of Geneva's highly inventive and troublesome schemes for relief. Although there were some supporters of the ICRC at the Foreign Office – Walter Roberts being the best example – MEW's attitude towards the ICRC's expansion left its mark on other areas in Whitehall.<sup>471</sup>

In September 1943 the DPW expressed concern to the American Red Cross that the ICRC was 'definitely attempting to obtain an operative control over matters which are entirely outside the supervisory functions of the Committee'.<sup>472</sup> Similar doubts, held by the Ministry of War Transport and the Admiralty over the Committee's ability to handle the management of a fleet, were given some validation on 9 July 1943 when the ICRC ordered a BRC parcel ship on the Lisbon-Marseilles route, the *Lobito*, to leave Lisbon without a safe conduct. The order had been given after the Admiralty refused to grant the *Lobito* safe passage to Marseilles on the grounds that Geneva's application for a safe conduct had been lodged with only one day's notice – the usual practice required at least six days.<sup>473</sup>

There is no evidence to suggest the ICRC's action was in any way purposely defiant of British wishes. The order to sail was an honest mistake on the part of the ICRC, caused by the convoluted method of notification required for ships sailing along the Lisbon-Marseilles route and the difficulties any vessel faced

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<sup>471</sup> In addition to approving of Burckhardt, Roberts was also at pains to maintain good diplomatic relations with the ICRC during the latter's efforts to expand the London delegation. He pressured both his colleagues at the Foreign Office and MI5, to approve the delegation's expansion and ensure the arrival of visiting ICRC delegates was conducted as quickly and with as little hassle as possible – TNA:PRO FO 916/613 – Roberts Minute, 23 January 1943; Roberts to Liddell, 1 March 1943.

<sup>472</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/618 – DPW to ARC, 14 September 1943.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid. – ADM to PWD, 8 July 1943; FO to Geneva, 9 July 1943.

in sticking to a pre-determined sailing schedule in times of war.<sup>474</sup> Once the mistake had been recognised the Committee ordered the *Lobito* to head directly for Gibraltar to await the granting of a safe conduct.<sup>475</sup> Despite the ICRC's efforts to correct the error, the Ministry of War Transport could not resist tersely pointing out to the Foreign Office that the financial cost of the ICRC's neglect would have to be borne by the BRC, which had chartered the vessel. This was followed by the PWD requesting that the Committee be reminded that ships along the Lisbon-Marseilles route were BRC ships and that the ICRC's only job was to guarantee their safety by ensuring Red Cross markings and the presence of an escorting agent.<sup>476</sup>

Although it may have served to validate the complaints of the ICRC's critics in Whitehall, in the context of the ever-widening scope of the Committee's shipping operations the failure to report the *Lobito*'s sailing was one of only a handful of minor incidents. Non-Red Cross freight was mistakenly loaded at Lisbon on one occasion and a German soldier was found stowed away onboard the *Caritas I* on 25 April 1945, but in general the ICRC's capacity to supervise its new shipping schemes was good and the incidence of negligence minimal.

<sup>477</sup> This claim, stated in the ICRC's post-war report, is backed up by some simple calculations.

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<sup>474</sup> The notification time sometimes altered, depending on the route of the ships, anywhere from 10 days notification to 48 hours. The process of notification started with the ICRC delegation in Lisbon informing the British and German Naval Attaches there of a vessels' sailing schedule. This in turn, was transmitted to the Admiralty and the *Kriegsmarine*, which were required to grant the vessel a safe conduct before it left port – *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.150.

<sup>475</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/618 – Ministry of War Transport to PWD, 10 July 1944; *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.150.

<sup>476</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/618 – Ministry of War Transport to PWD 10 July 1943; PWD to WO, 17 July 1943.

<sup>477</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.143n.

From the first voyage of the *Kurtulus* in April 1941 until the end of the war 43 vessels made 383 voyages under the auspices of the ICRC.<sup>478</sup> Including the non-reporting of the *Lobito* and the two cargo incidents mentioned above, there were three further incidents of poor notification. The first concerned the aforementioned *Stureborg*, a mistake that led to its sinking by Italian planes. There were also two more incidents in 1944 which resulted in attacks being made on Marseilles-bound vessels, *Embla* and the *Cristina*, the details of which will be discussed in another chapter. In summary, of 383 voyages, there were only six notable infractions made by the ICRC. This record hardly backs up the Admiralty's claim in April 1944 that 'Geneva indeed appears to be extremely lax' in its shipping matters.<sup>479</sup>

Furthermore, archival evidence suggests that the Committee's penchant for bureaucratic minutiae extended to its handling of shipping issues. In addition to generally providing sufficient notification, on occasions when new ships were required, such as the *Spokane* in December 1943, the ICRC made sure to provide the British with as much information as possible, notifying them of the specific colour, dimensions, speed, tonnage and manufacturer of the ship.<sup>480</sup> Other requirements set down by the Ministry, such as a prohibition on the use of ships for refugee evacuation, exchange of civilian internees and the transport of medical supplies, were also stringently adhered to by the Committee – albeit with protestations, given that a primary facet of the original conception of the White Ships was to facilitate these aims.<sup>481</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.477.

<sup>479</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/941 – ADM to PWD, 21 April 1944.

<sup>480</sup> This ship was renamed the *Caritas II* and became one of the ICRC's key vessels – TNA:PRO FO 916/618 – Geneva to FO, 30 December 1943.

<sup>481</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.141.

In considering the British government's handling of the ICRC's relief plans from mid 1941 until mid 1943 it is clear that with the exception of Greece and the concessions made to internees in southern France, the integrity of the blockade was preserved, despite the best efforts of the ICRC. Even with this hindrance the ICRC's efforts brought success. POW parcel delivery in Europe reached the pinnacle of its efficiency during this period and from spring 1942 the number of visits to camps by ICRC and Protecting Power officials greatly increased, reaching a peak of 105 visits during the winter of 1943.<sup>482</sup> These two improvements were of significant benefit for the welfare of British POWs – an outcome that was unquestionably the primary goal of Whitehall in its handling of the ICRC's expansion. In considering this fact alongside the slew of rejected ICRC expansion schemes, it is fitting to conclude that Whitehall's objective to steer the Committee's ambitions in a direction that would primarily benefit the British was a success. That said, some officials in Whitehall grudgingly recognised the Committee's achievements during this period as indications that the ICRC was indeed capable of acting more than as a mere conduit of relief for British internees.

Although MEW based its arguments against the ICRC's schemes on the belief that the Committee was incapable of managing its ambitions, it should be noted that in March 1943 one of the Committee's chief critics, W.A. Camps, told the Co-Ordination Centre for Relief in Washington that 'the International Red Cross appears, from various signs we have noted, to be manoeuvring with more than usual vigour for the position of central agency for civilian relief in Europe'. Although he expressed this 'merely as an interesting opinion', Camps did hint that, should the blockade be lowered, the ever-expanding

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<sup>482</sup> Vourkoutiotis, 'What the Angels Saw', p.692.

ICRC might, in fact, be the right candidate to manage a massive relief effort.

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This indicates that, in spite of its persistent clashes with Geneva, MEW may have followed some officials at the Foreign Office in recognising the ICRC's abilities. In the struggle to maintain blockade policy, however, this view was a minority one and as such was never nurtured in the Ministry, even after the start of 1943 when the Committee reached its apex of efficiency. The very principle of the blockade did not allow the entertainment of such notions. We can only speculate as to how much more beneficial the ICRC's schemes might have been for non-British POWs, concentration camp internees and civilian populations, had the Ministry, and indeed the rest of Whitehall, shown greater acknowledgement of and encouragement for the Committee's capabilities, rather than emphasising the need to curtail and control these capabilities to suit British ends.

What is evident, however, is that this situation had consequences for British-ICRC relations. As noted above, Robert Brunel and his associates formed a bitter opinion of the blockading authorities during their struggle to bring relief to Greece. The problems over the CCPS also left an indelible mark on Alfred Zollinger. After many more fruitless months of struggling for blockade concessions on behalf of concentration camp inmates, the delegate angrily declared to a representative of the World Jewish Congress that he would publish incriminating material on Washington and Whitehall's attitude towards the Jews in Hungary.<sup>484</sup> Nicholas Burckhardt similarly claimed – albeit after

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<sup>483</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1214 – MEW to Co-Ordination Centre, Washington, 10 March 1943.

<sup>484</sup> Bela Vago, 'The Horthy Offer: A Missed Opportunity For The Jews in 1944' in *Contemporary Views on the Holocaust*, ed. R.L. Brahm (Boston, 1983), p.40.



the war – that he had been frustrated by British disregard for reports he presented to them regarding the transport of Jews to camps and ghettos.<sup>485</sup>

For the ICRC delegates in constant contact with the British, the experiences of prolonged debate with Whitehall during 1942-43 were subject to more nuanced appraisal. Ever keen to maintain good relations with his hosts, Rudolph Haccius continued through 1942 to play the neutral conduit.<sup>486</sup> The nearest he came to straying from this path worked in Britain's favour when in April 1943 he gave the Foreign Office prior warning of Zollinger's intention to raise blockade issues during his visit to London.<sup>487</sup> In general, however, Haccius followed a conciliatory policy in dealing with the British that was markedly different to that expressed by the ICRC delegates on the ground. In doing so Haccius was following a policy championed by Carl Burckhardt, whose rise to prominence in Geneva from late 1942 onwards significantly affected the ICRC's political and diplomatic conduct for the rest of the war. In the wake of the often tumultuous interactions between the ICRC and the British during the war's early years the goal of this conduct was simple: to develop a new, more agreeable working relationship with Whitehall.

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<sup>485</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, pp.418-419.

<sup>486</sup> See ICRC:D/EUR/GB1-31 generally for Haccius' correspondence with the British from 1939-43.

<sup>487</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/613 – FO Minute, 3 April 1943.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **POLITICS AND PRAGMATISM**

#### **THE COMMITTEE'S NEW DIRECTION**

In the introduction to this thesis reference was made to the two war time presidents of the ICRC: the cautious, moralistic Max Huber and the ambitious, politically-minded Carl Burckhardt. As the preceding chapter has shown, Burckhardt's approach to his duties, made whilst he was vice-president rather than president, was highly successful in improving the ICRC's traditional undertaking of parcel delivery for POWs and civilians. However, despite the success of the White Ships and the JRC's activities on the ground, these innovations led to very little change in the ICRC's leadership's overall policy of operations. This was still guided, during the formation of these initiatives, by Huber's orthodoxy when dealing with belligerents and by adherence to the fundamental principle of the ICRC's existence – to exercise neutrality whilst providing impartial relief for victims of war. In late 1942, however, a notable change began in Geneva as Burckhardt's star rose and Huber's health – always fragile – led to him gradually withdrawing from the Committee's presidency. Ultimately, this decline led to Huber nominating Burckhardt to replace him as official president of the ICRC in December 1944.<sup>488</sup> By that time the leadership transition was a formality.

As early as autumn 1942 the currents of change, both in leadership and policy, were already emanating from Burckhardt and spreading through the entire Committee. Nowhere was this change more evident than in the Committee's infamous "non-appeal" meeting of 14 October 1942, at which the

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<sup>488</sup> Burckhardt assumed the post on 1 January 1945 – Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.590.

bedridden Huber cast his absentee vote for silence on the issue of the Holocaust, whilst Burckhardt held forth at the ICRC leadership meeting at the Hotel Metropole advocating similarly for the dropping of any public *démarche* against the Nazis. Although both men agreed on the Committee's course of action, there was a subtle, yet significant, difference in their reasoning, which exemplifies the path down which the ICRC would be led in the war's final years.

For Huber, publicly accusing Berlin of such crimes was out of the question as such a flagrant act of impartiality breached both the Committee's key principle of neutrality and its policy of non-intervention in matters beyond its mandate. He felt the Committee would be better disposed to issue broadly worded appeals to all belligerents urging them to conduct the war in as humane a fashion as possible, whilst the Red Cross delegates on the ground continued to provide relief wherever they could. Ever aware of the ICRC's limitations in terms of political weight – which would have been needed in order to draw a favourable response from Berlin – Burckhardt agreed with Huber's sentiments. But, unlike the president, Burckhardt knew better than to build justification for this argument on the ever-weakening foundations of ICRC neutrality – foundations he himself had shaken by his peace-seeking activities in the war's early years.

Burckhardt felt a dose of reality was needed in Geneva. Accordingly, he used the occasion of the 14 October meeting to raise the unpleasant fact that the Nazi hold over Europe was so absolute that it could and, if provoked, would eclipse the moral authority of the ICRC and its Conventions. As such, he deemed the idea of speaking out against Berlin to be both futile and dangerous in that the Nazis could retaliate by hindering ICRC relief operations to POW camps throughout Europe. Better, thought Burckhardt, to place the

fate of the Jews within the context of a wider problem, that being the Nazis' brutal treatment of not just Jews, but POWs, civilians and concentration camp internees of all races and nationalities. In order to help these people, Burckhardt argued, the goals of the ICRC had to become more focused, realistic and attainable. Rather than relying on the grand gesture of a public *démarche*, he recommended that the Committee focus on working behind the scenes, sending the odd private note of protest to Berlin concerning the Jews, whilst continuing, with greater pragmatism, its duty of providing practical relief to those it could actually save.<sup>489</sup>

Burckhardt's actions, in the direct aftermath of the "non appeal", stand as a prime example of how this new approach merged his political instincts with the Committee's more traditional humanitarian duties. Although written and non-publicised appeals were still sent to Berlin, the large public protest against the Holocaust was left to the Allies who, on 17 December 1942, made the move the ICRC refused to do, by issuing a joint statement denouncing the 'bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination directed mainly against the Jews'. Notably, this declaration appears to have been, at least in part, the result of Burckhardt's policy of discreet information passing. After the war the U.S. Consul in Geneva, Paul Squire, stated that it was the information provided by Burckhardt in November regarding the extent of the Final Solution – information gleaned from one of Burckhardt's former students and Weizsäcker at the *Auswärtiges Amt* – that helped convince Washington of the need to launch the *démarche*.<sup>490</sup>

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<sup>489</sup> For discussion on the "non appeal" meeting see Favez, *Holocaust*, pp.83-89.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid, pp.293-294 citing Squire Memo, 7 November 1942; Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, pp.424-25.

Burckhardt's leaking of this information indicates that, in spite of what has been written about his indifference to the fate of the Jews, he had at least thought that he should warn the Allies – whom he perhaps believed could exert more pressure than Geneva – of what he knew.<sup>491</sup> That is not to say that his efforts were entirely noble.

In passing this information to Squire, Burckhardt's intention was more than likely to give the impression of something being done in Geneva, to encourage the Allies to do the ICRC's work for them, and, in the process, absolve the Committee of any blame from Berlin for meddling in the Reich's affairs. Although this tactic was successful in that it spawned a public appeal, it is worth noting that the words of the Allies fell, just as Burckhardt had warned of the ICRC's approach, on deaf ears in Berlin and resulted in no improvement in conditions for the Jews of Europe. Even so, it is clear that Burckhardt, using his contacts in Germany, broke the ICRC's guidelines on discretion in order to get word of the Holocaust out to the wider world.

This instance was the first of many that, from 1942 until the end of the war, saw the ICRC turn, albeit slightly, away from Huber's orthodoxy to follow Burckhardt's new, more fluid, policy of discretion and pragmatism, characterised by a focus on 'practical and local activities'. As the Committee's official historian, André Durand, happily noted, it was a change that heralded a considerable improvement in the ICRC's efforts on behalf of victims of war,

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<sup>491</sup> Herbert S. Levine has presented the most convincing explanation of Burckhardt's views on Jewish persecution, arguing that during his time in Danzig his motivation for pursuing close relations with the Nazis and working to moderate the Nuremberg Laws, was his desire to maintain law and order in the Free City. A similar pragmatism was taken by Burckhardt in his approach to the Holocaust, which he saw as a tragedy not just for the Jews, but for the wider cause of justice and order in Europe. This aloof view has naturally, led to accusations of Burckhardt being a passive anti-Semite. For further discussion see Herbert S. Levine, *Hitler's Free City: A History of the Nazi Party in Danzig, 1925-39* (Chicago, 1973), pp.140-44; Levine, 'The Mediator'; Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Starting World War II, 1937-9* (Chicago, 1980), pp.197-202; Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, pp.414-425; Crossland, 'Burckhardt'.

particularly concentration camp internees.<sup>492</sup> What Durand did not address, however, was the effect the ICRC's transformation from naïve philanthropist to politically-minded humanitarian over the course of 1942-43, had on its relations with those belligerents which, like Britain, had grown accustomed to Geneva's well-meaning amateurism.

The response to the ICRC's operational expansion has been covered in the previous chapter. To answer the question of how the Committee's overall policy change affected British-ICRC relations we need to examine the nature of the ICRC's conduct, not just in its customary role as provider for POWs, but in the Committee's less traditional involvement in areas which might best be termed "humanitarian diplomacy". Although Burckhardt's conduct on the Holocaust issue undoubtedly falls into the above category, the question of Red Cross involvement in the fate of European Jewry has little relevance to relations between the British and the ICRC and, indeed, has already been covered expertly by Jean-Claude Favez. Accordingly, my focus here will be on two diplomatic issues in which the policy of the "new" ICRC affected its relations with Britain – the year-long reciprocal shackling of enemy POWs by Berlin and London and the discovery of a mass grave of Polish POWs at Katyn in 1943.

### **PLAYING POLITICS: THE ICRC AND THE SHACKLING CRISIS**

Historians who have examined the Shackling Crisis of 1942-43 with a scope beyond the experience of the prisoners themselves, have tended to focus on either the diplomatic background or the work of the Swiss Federal Council in its mediatory capacity as Protecting Power,<sup>493</sup> using the incident as either a yardstick to measure the latter's efficiency, or as an example of a watershed

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<sup>492</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.576.

moment in British-Swiss wartime relations.<sup>494</sup> Looking at this incident with an emphasis on the ICRC, however, it becomes apparent that Geneva's efforts to resolve the crisis were equal to, and by the end of the affair, greater than, those of Berne. Moreover, the actions of the ICRC during the Shackling Crisis provide insight into not only how and why Burckhardt's new pragmatic policy was being implemented, but also how it affected relations between the British, the ICRC and the Protecting Power.

The Shackling Crisis began on 8 October 1942 when the German government announced that 1,376 British and Canadian prisoners of war had been placed in shackles and would continue to be so for 12 hours a day for an indefinite period of time as an act of reprisal against Allied violations of the Geneva Convention.<sup>495</sup> The first violation had occurred on 19 August during a combined Canadian and British raid on the port of Dieppe, during which captured German prisoners were bound and blindfolded. Although the Germans initially accepted the British pledge to launch an inquiry into the matter, a more severe violation of the Convention in the aftermath of a similar raid on the Channel island of Sark on 4 October, prompted Berlin to respond with the shackling order.<sup>496</sup> This, in turn, was met by a reprisal from the British, who on 9 October coerced the Canadian government into shackling 1,100 German POWs held in Canada. Driven both by Hitler's desire

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<sup>493</sup> The Swiss government became the Protecting Power for the British following the entry of the United States into the war in December 1941.

<sup>494</sup> For discussion with an emphasis on POW conditions see S.P. MacKenzie, 'The Shackling Crisis: A Case Study in the Dynamics of Prisoner of War Diplomacy in the Second World War', *International History Review*, 17, no.1 (1995) 78-98; Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, ch.2. For discussion on Protecting Power functions and POW diplomacy see Jonathan F. Vance, 'Men in Manacles: The Shackling of Prisoners of War, 1942-1943', *The Journal of Military History*, 59, no. 3 (1995) 483-504, *Jstor*, <http://links.jstor.org> (accessed 21 May 2007); Wylie, *Britain and Switzerland*, pp.324-328; Vourkoutiotis, 'What The Angels Saw', pp.699-701.

<sup>495</sup> *Geneva Convention 1929*, Article 2; Vance, 'Men in Manacles', p.485.

<sup>496</sup> The Germans were further aggrieved by the fact that four German bodies were found on Sark with their hands bound behind their backs – Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, pp.40-43.

to use the POWs as bargaining chips for better conditions for German prisoners on the Eastern Front, and by Churchill's need to promulgate the ethos of never backing down, the situation was rapidly escalating beyond the scope of the original incident.<sup>497</sup>

The ICRC jumped quickly into the fray. On 9 October the Foreign Office received a message from Clifford Norton, the British minister in Berne, conveying an offer from Burckhardt to mediate in the matter. The Committee was not alone in its approach. Less than an hour after hearing from the ICRC Norton received a similar offer of mediation – undoubtedly co-ordinated with the ICRC – from Marcel Pilet-Golaz, the president of the Swiss Federal Council and key representative of the Protecting Power.<sup>498</sup> Before examining how the British dealt with these two options for mediation it is important to clarify how Whitehall viewed the status of both the Protecting Power and the ICRC in regards to "humanitarian diplomacy".

The Shackling Crisis was not the first instance in which the British had experienced a crossover in the services offered by the ICRC and the Protecting Power. As mentioned in the first chapter, Whitehall's POW departments wrestled with this question of jurisdiction throughout the 1940-41 parcel crisis. Although there were criticisms by the British of the efforts of US camp inspectors during this time – leading to British reliance on ICRC camp inspectors as the crisis escalated – Whitehall's general perception of the Committee was still that it was an amateur body, subordinate to the Protecting Power, however disappointing the latter's efforts sometimes were.

<sup>499</sup> The assumption of the role of Protecting Power by Switzerland following the

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<sup>497</sup> Vance, 'Men in Manacles', p.488.

<sup>498</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – FO to London, 9 October 1942.

<sup>499</sup> See Chapter 1, p.71



United States' entry into the war in December 1941 and the subsequent muddle in co-ordination between Berne and Geneva over camp inspection schedules – for which the ICRC was blamed by Whitehall – reinforced this perception.<sup>500</sup>

Although undoubtedly a manifestation of the long held negative view of the ICRC's capabilities, the British favouring of the Swiss Federal Council in the role of Protecting Power was influenced by other factors. Since October 1939 the ICRC and the Swiss Federal Council – which was the Protecting Power representative of Germany from the start of the war<sup>501</sup> – had been campaigning to organise exchanges of sick and wounded POWs between the belligerents. In the course of these negotiations the roles of both parties in POW matters had been clarified by Whitehall, with the general understanding being reached that the Swiss would handle diplomatic matters such as negotiation and liaison with belligerent governments, whilst the ICRC would work out the practical issues of making the exchanges possible, through organising shipping, escorting and supervision.<sup>502</sup>

In keeping with Whitehall's tendency to limit the ICRC's scope, this arrangement generally satisfied the British, in particular Alan Hunter who was 'sure the IRCS (sic) will do all they can to run the show, but having in mind their status under the Convention I think this would be wrong and most unsatisfactory'.<sup>503</sup> This viewpoint was still prevalent and indeed, clarified in no

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<sup>500</sup> There had been at least three camp inspection clashes between the ICRC and the PP inspectors over the summer of 1942. The reason given for this was that the German authorities gave the Committee very short notice of when it could run its inspections and so were unable to co-ordinate them better with Berne. Nevertheless, the British blamed the ICRC for the problem – ICR:G85/1048 – Gepp to Huber, 5 February 1942.

<sup>501</sup> TNA:PRO WO 366/26 – *POWs in WWI*, p.39.

<sup>502</sup> For details on POW exchanges see *Geneva Convention 1929*, Articles 68-7. For details of ICRC/Protecting Power roles in POW exchanges see *ICRC Report*, vol.1, pp.373-375.

<sup>503</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/15 – Hunter to Roberts, 25 July 1941.

uncertain terms in May 1942 by Harold Satow at the PWD, who stated that regarding negotiations over POWs and breaches of the Convention, the ICRC had 'no diplomatic status'. This statement appeared in the draft of Satow's correspondence to Sir Richard Howard-Vyse at the BRC and, perhaps mindful that this blunt language might get back to Geneva via its British counterparts, the phrase was amended in the final copy to read 'cannot make on our behalf, representations regarding what we consider to be breaches of the P/W Convention'.<sup>504</sup> If one considers the original draft, it is clear that Satow was diplomatically stating what the British had held as policy for much of the war: the ICRC was to be restrained in matters of diplomacy and used only where necessary for purposes of POW relief.

How inflexible the British attitude could be is apparent in Whitehall's handling of POW mistreatment at Averoff prison camp in Athens. An initial approach to the ICRC enquiring into the lists of those interned was sent in January 1942, after the Foreign Office confirmed, notably, that it was Geneva, rather than Berne, which could provide a better answer.<sup>505</sup> When, having received ICRC inspectors' reports, it became clear a year later that POWs were being mistreated at the camp, the appeal for an inquiry to the German government was sent via the Protecting Power.<sup>506</sup>

The fact that the Swiss inspectors took over three months to respond to the Foreign Office's request for an investigation at Averoff did little to shake this faith in Berne and when further violations, this time the theft of blankets and food by the guards, was reported in November 1943 the solution once again was to ask the Swiss government to launch an investigation. The ICRC, by

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<sup>504</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/251 – Satow to Howard-Vyse, 15 May 1942.

<sup>505</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/424 – DPW to PWD, 26 January 1942.

<sup>506</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/702 – DPW to PWD, 12 February 1943.

contrast, was merely requested to send replacements for the supplies.<sup>507</sup>

Unlike the situation with US inspectors in 1940, Whitehall by 1942, perhaps owing to wariness at the ICRC's expansion, was less willing than ever to let the Committee share duties with the Protecting Power.

At the time of the Shackling Crisis this view of the Swiss Federal Council as a more credible conduit for dealing with POW matters was complemented by a change in the British diplomatic corps in Switzerland. David Kelly, the British minister in Berne, was a friend of Pilet-Golaz, however, he also enjoyed a relationship of 'great cordiality', 'friendship and hospitality' with Burckhardt. Kelly also, notably, voiced support for the Committee's 'beneficial and expanding role' when, having been reassigned to Buenos Aires in April 1942, he saw fit to compose a parting letter of thanks to '*mon cher*' Burckhardt for his friendship during his time in Switzerland.<sup>508</sup>

Kelly's replacement in the post of British minister in Berne was the no-nonsense Clifford Norton, who initially held little regard for Burckhardt's attempts at backdoor diplomacy. This was perhaps owing to the fact that Norton had been the Foreign Office's *chargé d'affaires* in Poland and a counsellor at the embassy in Warsaw during Burckhardt's tenure as High Commissioner to Danzig between 1937 and 1939.

As an adamant supporter of the Poles it is likely he, like so many others, found Burckhardt's seemingly pro-Nazi conduct unsettling, or, at the very least, gained the not unreasonable impression of Burckhardt as an amateur

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<sup>507</sup> Ibid. – Berne to FO, 29 April 1943; Berne to FO, 3 November 1943; DPW to PWD, 11 November 1943.

<sup>508</sup> ICRC:G85/1048 – Kelly to Burckhardt, 6 April 1942.

and troublesome diplomat.<sup>509</sup> Norton was however, a fan of Pilet-Golaz and sympathetic, as many in Whitehall had been since 1940, to Switzerland's geographical plight in the jaws of the Third Reich. This sympathy for the Swiss Federal Council, plus the undoubted improvement Berne was able to bring to its services on behalf of British interests, further marginalised the already slim degree of faith Whitehall had in the ICRC as a diplomatic entity in matters pertaining to POWs.<sup>510</sup>

Burckhardt, of course, saw things very differently. Four days after offering Norton his services in the Shackling Crisis, the intrepid Swiss sent a further offer to the PWD in which he ignored the accepted procedure of Whitehall deferring to the Protecting Power by offering to mediate in a fresh round of exchange proposals for POWs and civilians who had been held in long-term captivity.<sup>511</sup> This was one of the many signs that Burckhardt was dissatisfied with the Committee's position as assistant to the Protecting Power in matters of mediation. He said as much in December 1942, when he lamented that the Committee had 'suffered an irreparable loss of prestige' by having its activities made subordinate to those of Berne.<sup>512</sup> This attitude in part explains why Burckhardt chose to involve himself so deeply in the Shackling Crisis. His ambitious personality, sense of self worth and evident desire to inject diplomacy into the policies of what was fast becoming *his* ICRC, meant that he was never going to accept the role envisaged by the British of the ICRC as junior partner to the Swiss government.

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<sup>509</sup> Peter Neville, 'Norton, Sir Clifford John (1891–1990)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press: Sept 2004, online edn, Jan 2008 <http://Owww.oxforddnb.com.prospero.murdoch.edu.au/view/article/65288> (accessed 14 January 2009).

<sup>510</sup> The two main successes were the granting of entry into civilian internments camps holding British subjects in occupied France and the revival of negotiations for long term POW exchanges under Berne's auspices – Wylie, *Britain and Switzerland*, pp.97-98.

<sup>511</sup> ICRC:G85/1048 – Burckhardt to PWD, 13 October 1942.

<sup>512</sup> Favez, *Holocaust*, p.278 citing ICRC:Box B – Burckhardt to Albert Oeri, 11 December 1942.

Another, more justifiable, reason for Burckhardt to get involved was the need to preserve the ICRC's new found emphasis on pragmatic activities. Given the timing of the crisis in relation to the 14 October meeting, the reciprocal shackling was viewed not only as a humanitarian concern but, perhaps more importantly, as a potential millstone around the neck of Burckhardt's emerging doctrine of 'practical and local' relief work. His concern stemmed from the fact that this policy hinged significantly on the belligerents' continued adherence to the Geneva Convention, the 'essential texts' of which, Burckhardt concluded, had been violated by both parties the moment they initiated the shackling reprisals.<sup>513</sup> Ever the pessimist, Burckhardt recognised early that if such reprisals escalated to their logical extreme, the sanctity of the Convention might be jeopardised – a conclusion that proved adroit when in late November Berlin hinted, however insincerely, that it was prepared to cease abiding by the Hague and Geneva Conventions.<sup>514</sup>

Burckhardt's official motivation, therefore, was to end the crisis as quickly as possible in order to protect the ICRC, which could not operate without the belligerents' adherence to the Geneva Convention. When writing to the Foreign Office he employed the Committee's often used tactic of appealing to British self interest, using the violation of the Convention to justify his offer to help end a situation that 'might seriously jeopardise the entire question of prisoners of war and affect Red Cross work for them'.<sup>515</sup> Pilet-Golaz was more reserved in his offer, simply stating that if the British thought it necessary, the Swiss were ready to place themselves at Whitehall's disposal.<sup>516</sup>

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<sup>513</sup> TNA:PRO FO 193/555 – Berne to FO, 23 October 1942.

<sup>514</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – FO Memo, 24 November 1942.

<sup>515</sup> ICRC:G85 1048 – Burckhardt to FO, 9 October 1942.

<sup>516</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – Berne to FO, 9 October 1942.

The British were not keen on either option. The general feeling was that both the Swiss Federal Council and the ICRC had 'a misconception of the position' they held in the matter.<sup>517</sup> In terms of the Convention this was untrue. A breach of Article 2 dealing with the prohibition of reprisals had occurred and the Protecting Power was, under the conditions of Article 87, authorised to intervene in settling the dispute with the assistance of the ICRC if necessary.<sup>518</sup> Even so Whitehall, despite its aforementioned preference for the Protecting Power, was still inclined to reject both Berne's and Geneva's mediation offers. Neville Wylie offers two explanations for this attitude, the first being that the British did not wish to place the Swiss in a position where they would have to endanger themselves by acting against Berlin's interests, the second that Whitehall was simply against any third party mediation in its political affairs.

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It is true that German intentions towards Switzerland in late 1942 were far from clear. Despite the tactical irrationality of the *Wehrmacht* marching on Switzerland at this time, many in the German press were still calling for Swiss heads to roll, in part prompting Berne to commit the Berlin-friendly action of closing Swiss borders to Jewish refugees in August 1942.<sup>520</sup> However, if one considers the manifold instances of British resistance to ICRC intervention detailed in the preceding chapters, Wylie's second explanation seems more likely to have been the primary motivator.

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<sup>517</sup> TNA:PRO CAB 65/28 – Minutes of Cabinet Meeting, 12 October 1942.

<sup>518</sup> *Geneva Convention 1929*, Articles 2 and 87.

<sup>519</sup> Wylie, *Britain and Switzerland*, pp.324-325.

<sup>520</sup> For discussion see *Bergier Report*, p.90; Leitz, *Nazi Germany and Neutral Europe*, p.23.

There may have been more to the British decision than Whitehall's habitual reluctance to accept Swiss mediation. Churchill's comment to Clement Attlee that a consideration of either offer was 'only a step to mediate peace' indicates that the significance of the specific involvement of Pilet-Golaz and Burckhardt was not unappreciated.<sup>521</sup> Although Alexander Cadogan, the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, put such stubbornness down to the Prime Minister's 'silly fighting mood',<sup>522</sup> it is highly likely that the memory of the Burckhardt/Pilet-Golaz peace feeler scare of the previous year – on which Churchill had been fully briefed – was also a factor in raising initial apprehension at the idea of either Swiss getting involved in diplomatic issues concerning His Majesty's government.<sup>523</sup>

This wariness could not, however, resist the pressure of the Canadian government, which had only agreed to reprisal shackling in order to avoid a rift with Whitehall. Moreover, the agreement came with a proviso that the British would seek mediation via the Protecting Power, a request which the British grudgingly acceded to on 13 October.<sup>524</sup> The official British reply to the ICRC made clear that the Protecting Power was the favoured channel of mediation, which left any further consultation between the Swiss government and the ICRC in the hands of the latter to pursue.<sup>525</sup> This indicates that by this stage the views of the cabinet had been tempered, perhaps by the realisation

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<sup>521</sup> TNA:PRO PREM 3/363/2 – Churchill to Attlee, 11 October 1942.

<sup>522</sup> Alexander Cadogan, *The Diaries of Alexander Cadogan: 1938-1945*, ed. David Dilks (New York, 1972), 12 October 1942, p.483.

<sup>523</sup> That Churchill himself knew of this issue is evidenced by his initials being on the inner file of TNA:PRO FO 371/2644 and on several documents therein concerning the Pilet-Golaz/Burckhardt peace feeler.

<sup>524</sup> The British requested the Protecting Power launch an inquiry into the matter on the basis that the shackling of POWs was a cruel and unusual punishment, distinct from the initial binding of German prisoners whilst on the battlefield at Dieppe and Sark – TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – Minutes of Cabinet Meeting, 13 October 1942; TNA:PRO WO 193/355 – FO to Berne, 13 October 1942.

<sup>525</sup> ICRC:G85/1048 – Livingston to Huber, 15 October 1942.

that the ICRC did, under the terms of the Convention, have every right to become involved. Even so, it is clear by the re-iteration to the ICRC of Harry Livingston, British Consul in Geneva, that the British 'counter measures' were forced upon them by the actions of Berlin, that Whitehall believed the Committee's only real concern in the issue was the question of whether the belligerents' shackling measures had breached the Convention.<sup>526</sup> Actual involvement of the ICRC in negotiations to end the shackling was to be discouraged.

What Livingston did not yet realise was that Burckhardt was far more concerned with mediation than he was with questions of International Humanitarian Law. On 15 October – the same day Livingston informed the Committee that the Protecting Power was the preferred mediator – Burckhardt telephoned Edward de Haller, the dual Swiss Federal delegate/ICRC delegate, to inform him that the ICRC was indeed active in a mediation capacity. Burckhardt told de Haller that he had informed Wolfgang Krauel, his old friend and German Consul in Geneva, that London had accepted the ICRC's mediation offer, prompting Krauel to contact 'competent military authorities' in Berlin.<sup>527</sup> This was the start of Burckhardt's thirteen month long effort to end the Shackling Crisis.

The next phase of his initiative began on 28 October, the day after the ICRC received a polite reminder from Livingston – who by now had become aware of Burckhardt's intentions – that, although grateful to the ICRC for its offer, his government 'have already invited the Protecting Power to lay before the German government their solemn protest' against Berlin's shackling.<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>526</sup> ICRC:G25/28/658 – Livingston to ICRC, 28 October 1942.

<sup>527</sup> ICRC:G25/28/658 – Burckhardt to de Haller (phone call text), 15 October 1942.

<sup>528</sup> Burckhardt advised Livingston to refrain from making a public announcement about the ICRC's involvement until he had received a reply from Krauel – Ibid. – Livingston to Burckhardt (phone



Ignoring Whitehall's sentiments, Burckhardt wrote to Dr. Ernst Grawitz, SS *Gruppenführer* and head of the German Red Cross (DRK), asking for him both to pass on and to support Geneva's suggestion that the shackles be removed in incremental fashion, under ICRC supervision and with no publicity. As a measure of the weight of Burckhardt's contacts in Berlin, the letter was presented to Hitler himself, who, so Roland Marti later reported, found it to be a 'reasonable document'.<sup>529</sup> Having received this report of the Führer's opinion hopes rose in Geneva that Berlin would launch a fresh proposal for ending the crisis. Moreover, this fresh approach was expected to be directed at the ICRC for mediation, rather than at Pilet-Golaz. This was a move which Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, head of the OKW and presumably a member of the 'competent military circles' alluded to by Krauel, expressed support for.<sup>530</sup>

The hoped-for approach from Berlin did not come. As has been suggested by Arie J. Kochavi and S.P. MacKenzie, this may have been owing both to Hitler's vengeful frame of mind and his desire to drag out the Shackling Crisis for as long as he could in a vain effort to persuade the British to moderate the brutal treatment of German POWs by their Soviet allies.<sup>531</sup> It is unclear whether Burckhardt knew of Hitler's opinion. The fact that Burckhardt's next overture was aimed at the Führer's subordinates, however, suggests that the Red Cross man realised that a new, more subtle, plan was required. Burckhardt again contacted Krauel in late November in order to obtain information on the views of other German leaders, in particular Ribbentrop.<sup>532</sup>

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call text), 29 October 1942; Livingston to ICRC, 28 October 1942.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid. – Burckhardt to Grawitz, 28 October 1942. For report on Hitler's opinion see Marti to Gallopin (phone call text), 26 November 1942.

<sup>530</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.369.

<sup>531</sup> Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, pp.44-45; MacKenzie, 'Shackling Crisis', p.89.

<sup>532</sup> ICRC:G25/25/658 – Krauel to Burckhardt, 1 December 1942; TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – Berne to FO, 20 November 1942; PWD to DO, 5 November 1942.

At the same time Burckhardt also encouraged Haccius to agitate for permission to inspect the camps in Britain holding the shackled prisoners. In the interests of reciprocity, inspections were also organised for Marti in Germany and Ernst Maag, the ICRC delegate in Canada.<sup>533</sup> Although of value in terms of the ICRC's traditional mandate, these inspections were less about pure philanthropy than about adding depth to Burckhardt's plan. As he stated to Marti, the inspections were designed more specifically to form a basis upon which to suggest to the belligerents that, as the prisoners were not being mistreated, the matter could be resolved quietly by the simultaneous removal of the shackles.<sup>534</sup> Burckhardt clearly saw, correctly as it turned out, that discretion and the need for all parties concerned to maintain prestige, was the key to solving the crisis.

In December 1942 Burckhardt came very close to achieving this goal. At that time the Canadian government was planning to unshackle some of its prisoners with an aim to initiate a reciprocal gesture from Berlin. In order to save face the British agreed to put the Canadian proposal to the Swiss Federal Council in order to make it seem that the Allies and the Germans were unshackling simultaneously.<sup>535</sup> As the British awaited a response from Berne, Burckhardt interjected himself into this latest initiative.

Having taken soundings from Krauel on the views of the *Wilhelmstrasse* – generally one of opposition to the shackling – Marti reported to Burckhardt

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<sup>533</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – Berne to FO, 20 November 1942; PWD to DO, 5 November 1942. Conditions for the prisoners in all three countries were deemed to be good by the ICRC's inspectors. It was Marti's belief that the prisoners at Oflag VIIB were treated with greater kindness by the camp authorities than non-shackled POWs – TNA:PRO WO 224/74 – ICRC Report on Oflag VIIB, 10 November 1942; ICRC Canada to ICRC London – 23 November 1943; *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.233.

<sup>534</sup> ICRC:C14 – Minutes of Central Committee Meeting, 20 and 23 November 1942; ICRC:G25/28/658 – Burckhardt to Marti, 2 November 1942.

<sup>535</sup> MacKenzie, 'Shackling Crisis' p.90.

that the Germans would agree to remove all shackles over the Christmas period. In a typical show of exuberance Churchill, having heard of this proposal, declared his desire to make a public statement in Parliament on 7 December announcing the removal of all shackles by the British as well. This was by no means an endorsement of Burckhardt's actions.

It was stated in the Foreign Office telegram to Berne that if 'the Swiss government's appeal is received in the meanwhile, Prime Minister will indicate that shackles are being removed immediately in response to it'.<sup>536</sup> This indicates that although de Haller and others in the Swiss Federal government may have known of, and supported, Burckhardt's efforts, the British were downplaying the role of the ICRC in favour of the Protecting Power. This was especially unreasonable given that, compared with Burckhardt, Pilet-Golaz' activities had been rather nonchalant in attempting to resolve the crisis. The British knew this to be so. On 10 November the Foreign Office asked with polite urgency for Berlin's response to Pilet-Golaz's initial enquiry which had been communicated by him to the Germans an entire month earlier.<sup>537</sup>

Despite these contrasting efforts it was Pilet-Golaz, not Burckhardt, who was applauded by the British for masterminding the cessation of shackling – a fact that has led some historians to either downplay Burckhardt's efforts or omit reference to them altogether.<sup>538</sup> As one of the few dissenters of this viewpoint has indicated, the real source of British gratitude for Pilet-Golaz's efforts lay in

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<sup>536</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – FO to Berne, 7 December 1942.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid. – FO to Berne, 10 November 1942.

<sup>538</sup> Phillimore's official history of the British Prisoner of War Departments exemplifies this view. Burckhardt is not even mentioned in the section dealing with the Shackling Crisis, which, Phillimore asserts, was simply 'discontinued' in 1943 by the Germans – TNA:PRO WO 366/26 – *POWs in WWII*, p.67. Kochavi does not mention Burckhardt at all when discussing the Shackling Crisis – Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, pp.48-52. Vance only mentions Burckhardt's final and successful appeal in October 1943 – Vance, 'Men in Manacles', p.497. MacKenzie does not mention Burckhardt either and instead indicates that the ICRC were informed by the Swiss Federal Council that the shackling was going to cease – MacKenzie, 'Shackling Crisis', pp.93-94.

the fact that he had managed to take a political hand grenade out of Whitehall's hands by agreeing to take on the negotiations.<sup>539</sup> Even though these negotiations were bolstered considerably by Burckhardt's efforts, it is understandable that, given that Pilet-Golaz was the official intermediary chosen by Whitehall, the emphasis was on praising the Protecting Power for this minor breakthrough – which in any event turned out to be a false dawn owing to the Germans re-applying the shackles on 26 December.<sup>540</sup>

Successful or otherwise, the credit given Berne for this small victory was largely undeserved. Although official representations on the proposal were made via the Swiss, it is evident that Burckhardt's liaison with Krauel and the engineering of reciprocal inspections played a larger part in prompting the German offer than Pilet-Golaz's patient waiting for a reply from Berlin. Those Germans who wanted the shackling to cease certainly felt this way, with such 'competent circles' in Berlin conveying to Odier in late December their support for Burckhardt's efforts.<sup>541</sup> Furthermore, as Neville Wylie has alluded, the efforts of Pilet-Golaz not only marginalised those of the ICRC, but may even have done more harm than good.<sup>542</sup>

As the deadline for the impending Christmas cessation neared, Pilet-Golaz admitted to the British that he had been aware of Burckhardt's efforts yet cast doubt on them by indicating that since the guarantee to unshackle had not come specifically from Hitler, it was perhaps questionable. This view played well on British suspicions that neither the 'German Army or German Foreign Office had any say in the matter'.<sup>543</sup> This assessment failed to consider the

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<sup>539</sup> Wylie, *Britain and Switzerland*, p.327.

<sup>540</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – Minutes of Cabinet Meeting, 30 December 1942.

<sup>541</sup> ICRC:C14 – Minutes of Central Committee Meeting, 21 December 1942.

<sup>542</sup> Wylie, *Britain and Switzerland*, p.327.

<sup>543</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – Berne to FO, 24 December 1942; WO Minute, 11 November 1942.

importance of Burckhardt's unshackling suggestion reaching high circles in Berlin and the fact that the Christmas cessation did indeed take place – albeit two weeks later than the day initially indicated by Burckhardt.<sup>544</sup> Furthermore, the decision to re-apply the shackles was in no way a consequence of Burckhardt's plan being faulty. The order to re-shackle was more likely to have stemmed from a combination of Hitler's desire to prolong the situation and London's obliging refusal to adhere to Berlin's request for a guarantee that shackling on the battlefield and elsewhere would not take place in future.<sup>545</sup> Owing both to this concern of a second shackling crisis emerging later in the war – a fear shared by Burckhardt as much as Berlin – and to Livingston's suggestion that the Committee stick to questions of the Convention, the ICRC sought to shape its next appeal along more traditional Red Cross lines.

In the first days of 1943 the Committee launched a fresh initiative aimed at resolving the 'divergences between the governments regarding meaning and scope' of Article 1 of the Geneva Convention.<sup>546</sup> Although it was an ICRC initiative, Pilet-Golaz was also involved in a significant supporting role. When Norton predictably dismissed the ICRC's suggestion as both a cause for confusion and a means of undermining Whitehall's faith in the Protecting Power, Pilet-Golaz's response was to speak up in support of the Committee's suggestion. Having admitted that for his part, 'it cannot be said that discussions are in progress', Pilet-Golaz suggested that the ICRC's idea be presented to Berlin for semi-official consideration. The rationale was that the ICRC's proposed investigation into the Convention could be used as a basis

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<sup>544</sup> It is unclear whether Hitler's entourage had any say in the Christmas cessation, but it is notable that most of those within his inner circle saw little merit in the shackling. The degree to which Hitler's subordinates had influence on his decisions is disputed. For discussion see Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, (London, 1993), ch.4.

<sup>545</sup> Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, p.48.

<sup>546</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – Berne to FO, 6 January 1943.

upon which to call for another cessation to the shackling.<sup>547</sup> This was, in essence, a modification of Burckhardt's own suggestion to unshackle in November 1942, albeit presented this time to the British through the more credible conduit of Pilet-Golaz.

It is unknown whether this change in approach was engineered by Burckhardt, but it is notable that at the same time Pilet-Golaz was presenting this option to the British, Burckhardt's old friend Weizsäcker was also voicing circuitous support for the ICRC initiative. At a meeting with the Swiss minister in Berlin, Weizsäcker stated that his government could not countenance the 'handing in of protests by a protecting power in the name of a state at war with Germany'.<sup>548</sup> Whether by Burckhardt's design or otherwise, it seems that by early 1943 the continental parties to the issue, including Pilet-Golaz himself, were looking to the ICRC, rather than to the Swiss Federal Council, for a solution.

The British, however, were not. Clifford Norton, for one, found Burckhardt's on-going discussions with Krauel to be unreliable and unhelpful distractions that might 'seriously have upset the delicate negotiations' he presumed to be underway under the auspices of Pilet-Golaz.<sup>549</sup> Norton's aforementioned regard for Pilet-Golaz, whom he described as possessing 'genuine sentiments of humanity',<sup>550</sup> no doubt influenced the minister's opinion. But in addition to this personal viewpoint Norton, in his capacity as the conduit through which Burckhardt's schemes were filtered to Whitehall, found the Red Cross man's

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<sup>547</sup> Ibid. – Berne to FO, 6 January 1943; Berne to FO, 16 January 1943.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid. – Berne to FO, 19 January 1943.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid. – Berne to FO, 10 March 1943.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid. – Berne to FO, 24 December 1942.

approaches to be a constant distraction from the embassy's more conservative and measured day to day handling of the situation.

Himself a humanitarian and son of a clergyman, Norton felt as deep an empathy for the shackled POWs as he felt confident in the Protecting Power's abilities to manage their fate in a sensible and level-headed manner. As such, he held a clear aversion to the cavalier nature of Burckhardt's approach. This attitude naturally affected not only relations between British officials in Switzerland and the ICRC but also, to some extent, Whitehall's overall handling of the Shackling Crisis.

When, for example, on 21 February Norton received a secret report from Burckhardt indicating that the physical shackling of the POWs was becoming less stringent, he advised the Foreign Office to take the information lightly and await credible confirmation from the Protecting Power. The Foreign Office, which valued Norton's opinion in regards to policy issues, agreed that the word of Krauel, from whom the information came, could not be trusted.<sup>551</sup> Notably, only Walter Roberts and Anthony Eden – both of whom had dealt with Burckhardt in the past and were aware of the intimacy of his contacts with Germans – offered any support for his contact with Krauel. Roberts raised the idea of using the 'new channel that is open to us' with his colleagues at the Foreign Office, whilst Eden confined himself guardedly to minuting that 'it will be of immense relief if and when Burckhardt's news is confirmed'.<sup>552</sup>

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<sup>551</sup> Ibid. – Berne to FO, 10 March 1942; 12 March 1943; TNA:PRO FO 916/558 – Berne to FO, 13 March 1943. For discussion on Norton and the Foreign Office's relationship to its legation in Switzerland see Wylie, *Britain and Switzerland*, pp.45-48.

<sup>552</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/557 – Roberts Minute, 21 February 1943; FO Minute, 27 February 1943.

Norton had no such faith and on 16 March he sent a telegram to the Foreign Office setting out clearly how further ICRC efforts should be considered. Using the excuse that Burckhardt had got his dates wrong when passing information about the Christmas cessation – and in the process glossing over the fact that the cessation took place regardless – Norton stated that ‘I cannot too strongly emphasise that only reports of protecting power can be regarded as really authoritative’.<sup>553</sup>

This dismissal of Burckhardt’s sources, although understandable in the wake of Whitehall’s endorsement of the Protecting Power as the official negotiator, was by this stage of the crisis misguided. Not only had Burckhardt proved his worth during the Christmas negotiations, but Krauel’s information from February was confirmed by the Protecting Power inspectors on 17 March. This was nearly a month after the Foreign Office was first informed by the ICRC that the shackles were fast becoming “symbolic”.<sup>554</sup> In addition to this, by early April Pilet-Golaz, who as mentioned above had previously indicated to Norton the merits of bringing in the ICRC, was admitting that ‘his own efforts have been ineffective’.<sup>555</sup>

One would think that in such circumstances the next best alternative to the Protecting Power, however unpalatable and unconventional, would have been better utilised and yet, despite being aware of Burckhardt’s contacts in Berlin and possessing evidence of their worth, the British continued to rely on Pilet-Golaz. Even after this reliance abated, the ICRC was still not even considered as an option by the Foreign Office, which was so thoroughly dissatisfied with the Swiss Federal Council’s efforts that it suggested that the only way to

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<sup>553</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – Berne to FO, 16 March 1943.

<sup>554</sup> Underline in original – TNA:PRO FO 916/558 – Berne to FO, 10 March 1943. For further discussion of the alleviation of the shackling in 1943 see MacKenzie, *Colditz Myth*, pp.247-248.

<sup>555</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – Berne to FO, 20 April 1943.



break the deadlock was to agree to the German demands for a general order prohibiting any further shackling.<sup>556</sup> As had been the case with the ICRC in Greece, the apparent closeness of Burckhardt to Berlin and the indication by the latter that the ICRC should be the official mediators,<sup>557</sup> was seen as a cause for alarm rather than a means of exploiting the situation to Whitehall's benefit.

That is not to say that the German suggestion for ICRC involvement should necessarily have been adopted along the lines advocated by Burckhardt and Berlin. The need to maintain prestige for the Protecting Power was quite rightly viewed as important by Norton and the Foreign Office and, more often than not, was employed as justification for their continual faith in Pilet-Golaz.

<sup>558</sup> However, there was little to be gained in this respect by dismissing Burckhardt's diplomatic efforts not only in public, but also behind the closed doors of Whitehall. If anything, a more welcome, if quiet, embrace of Burckhardt's endeavours may have helped to end the situation quicker, which in turn would have reflected well upon the "official" negotiators in Berne. The means by which the crisis was eventually resolved supports this argument.

By August 1943 the Shackling Crisis had descended into a disjointed farce. Reports from ICRC and Protecting Power inspectors spoke of the continuing decline in the severity of the reprisals, particularly at Oflag VIIIB where some of the supposedly shackled POWs took to 'carrying their manacles and

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<sup>556</sup> Burckhardt's suggestion that the ICRC delegate and former Swiss minister in Rome, Paul Ruegger, become involved was also rejected by the British – TNA:PRO FO 916/559 – FO Minutes, 25 June 1943; FO to Berne, 5 June 1943.

<sup>557</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.369.

<sup>558</sup> Norton's view was that in championing the ICRC, the Protecting Power might become 'indisposed' – TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – Berne to FO, 6 January 1943. For Norton's argument on the need to maintain Swiss prestige see Berne to FO, 9 December 1942.

swinging them nonchalantly as their hosts tried to count them'.<sup>559</sup> The opposite was true at Stalag VIIIB, where heavier chains had been applied and forced labour imposed upon one shackled prisoner who had a medical certificate proscribing only light work.<sup>560</sup> The inconsistency of these measures, combined with information from the DRK conveying the increasing discontent of the OKW and the *Auswärtiges Amt* over the reprisals, painted a picture of discord in Berlin over the issue. Having been made privy to this information, Burckhardt concluded that the time was ripe for another intervention.<sup>561</sup>

Once again Pilet-Golaz provided the official backing for this initiative, reporting to Norton in early August that both Keitel and Ribbentrop were planning to confront Hitler to suggest ending the reprisals.<sup>562</sup> Owing to Burckhardt's direct line into Berlin and the similarity of this report to that which Krauel provided in 1942, it is more than likely that this information was given to Pilet-Golaz via Burckhardt, yet the latter's name was not mentioned in the telegram.

The reason for this becomes apparent when one considers Burckhardt's comments to Livingston in November 1943. The Red Cross man reported that he had been asked by the DRK to visit Berlin to meet the German government, which 'desired to treat through Red Cross channels' a proposed resolution for ending the shackling. Notably, Burckhardt also emphasised to Livingston that whilst in Berlin he would 'have no contacts or discussions on political matters or any approaches outside [the] scope of Red Cross

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<sup>559</sup> MacKenzie, *Colditz Myth*, p.247 citing account of Tony Strachen in Robert Gayler, *Private Prisoner* (Wellingborough, 1984), p.68; TNA/PRO/WO 193/555 – Berne to FO, 14 September 1943.

<sup>560</sup> ICRC:G25/28/658 – Marti Note, 12 July 1943.

<sup>561</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.370.

<sup>562</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – Berne to FO, 6 August 1943.

business'.<sup>563</sup> Clearly Burckhardt realised that his prior indiscretions were a source of British apprehension over his involvement and so, having obtained the initial information of a possible resolution in August, he asked Pilet-Golaz to act as the official messenger in order to receive British approval. As the German government's preference was to use the ICRC as the diplomatic channel, however, it was Burckhardt who ultimately had to go to Berlin for the talks, hence the need to reassure Livingston that nothing suspicious was taking place.

Although Norton persisted in placing his faith in Pilet-Golaz – asking him the day after Burckhardt left for Berlin whether the Swiss had any further information on the shackling – it was clear to Pilet-Golaz himself that he had become a lame-duck negotiator. His reply to Norton's request was to wait for Burckhardt to report on his discussions in Berlin.<sup>564</sup> This report arrived on 23 November, stating that during a meeting between Burckhardt and Ribbentrop, it was decided that the shackles would be removed immediately and that Marti would visit all camps to confirm that the order had been carried out.<sup>565</sup> This was followed by confirmation via Pilet-Golaz on 10 December, that the order to shackle had been officially rescinded by Berlin.<sup>566</sup> Almost fourteen months after its initiation, the Shackling Crisis had been brought to a quiet, inglorious end under the auspices of the ICRC – exactly what Burckhardt had intended in October 1942.

It had been a marathon effort for all involved. Beyond the ordeal of the prisoners themselves the Shackling Crisis had dramatically affected British

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<sup>563</sup> Ibid. – Berne to FO, 10 November 1943.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid. – Berne to FO, 11 November 1943.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid. – Berne to FO, 23 November 1943.

<sup>566</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/560 – Berne to FO, 10 December 1943.

relations with Switzerland, bringing the hitherto ignored neutral firmly into the considerations of the War Cabinet and the Foreign Office. If, as had been argued by Neville Wylie, Pilet-Golaz's involvement helped raise the profile of Berne in the eyes of Whitehall,<sup>567</sup> how then did Burckhardt's generally unwelcome involvement affect British perceptions of Geneva?

Unlike the Swiss Federal Council, the ICRC had previously entered into discussions with the highest circles of power in Britain on the issues of POW parcel delivery and the blockade. As the previous chapters have shown, these prior interactions had generally painted the Committee in an unfavourable light, particularly regarding instances in which the ICRC was perceived to have strayed from its customary role as a provider of relief. Also, many of the British officials involved in the Shackling Crisis had been privy to Burckhardt's prior attempts at diplomacy from his position in Danzig in the late 1930s through to his peace feeler initiatives during the war's early years. The opinions formed of Burckhardt and the ICRC by these prior experiences contributed greatly to Whitehall's handling of the Shackling Crisis.

Much like the British rationale for bringing in the Swedes in Greece months earlier, Whitehall's reaction to the shackling was to limit the involvement of the ICRC as much as possible in favour of embracing a more "official" alternative – in this instance, the Swiss Federal Council. In a further echo of British rejection of Brunel's valiant work in Greece in early 1941, this decision once again led the British to dismiss Burckhardt's "unofficial" efforts during the Shackling Crisis in favour of those of Pilet-Golaz, even after the latter admitted that his discussions with the Germans had broken down. At the very least this admission should have prompted the British to pursue other channels, yet the Foreign Office, guided in its judgement by Clifford Norton,

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<sup>567</sup> Wylie, *Britain and Switzerland*, pp.326-327.

continued to place unwarranted faith in Pilet-Golaz at the expense of Burckhardt.

It can be argued that the British had good cause to be weary of Burckhardt's intervention, owing to his prior instances of dubious and unwanted diplomacy. However, once he had proved his credentials during the Christmas cessation and Krauel's information on the slackening of the reprisals in early 1943 had been verified, the British should have softened their attitude, particularly if one considers that by this time it was obvious that the quickest way to resolve the issue was via the kind of closed-door negotiations that Burckhardt thrived on and was experienced in. As is evidenced by his appeal to both belligerents in October 1942, Burckhardt recognised early that for Berlin and London the need to save face had to be the linchpin of any deal. It was this conclusion that dictated his efforts to resolve the issue, ultimately culminating in his clandestine meeting with Ribbentrop at which the latter made clear that no public declaration was to accompany the removal of the shackles – a condition to which the British agreed.<sup>568</sup>

In the wake of this agreement the British finally recognised Burckhardt's efforts, instructing Norton to pass on their gratitude, notably with the acknowledgement that Burckhardt's German contacts had played a pivotal role.<sup>569</sup> Burckhardt also received plaudits from Huber, whose own efforts to engineer the first exchange of long-term POWs around this time may also have played a part in the success of Burckhardt's November negotiations.<sup>570</sup> No doubt Burckhardt would have enjoyed this praise; however, he was

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<sup>568</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/10719 – Berne to FO, 23 November 1943; 7 December 1943.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid. – FO to Berne, 28 November 1943; ICRC:G25/28/658 – Norton to Burckhardt, 30 November 1943.

<sup>570</sup> ICRC:CO2/1.935 – Minutes of Central Commission Meeting, 23 December 1943; Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, p.52.

mindful of where such sentiments travelled. On 7 December the British indicated their desire to make a statement in parliament regarding the end of the shackling to which Burckhardt grudgingly agreed, but only on the proviso that the British should not express any gratitude towards either himself or the Committee.<sup>571</sup>

It was an odd request for a man who clearly enjoyed being regarded as a diplomat extraordinaire. But, as was becoming typical at this time, pragmatism ruled in Geneva. Burckhardt's request for a low-key acknowledgement came from his fear that public exposure of Berlin's backing down would lead to the resumption of reprisal measures. This in turn would not only undo his own triumph, but once again raise the spectre of non-adherence to the Geneva Convention and damage Burckhardt's attempts to establish the ICRC as a credible mediator in POW issues.<sup>572</sup>

There may have been more to Burckhardt's reaction, however, than concern over the effect on the Committee. Owing to his promise to Ribbentrop that the back down would not be acknowledged, the politician in Burckhardt was no doubt trying to preserve the goodwill he had built up in Berlin over the course of the Shackling Crisis. This intention to use the situation to strengthen the ICRC's diplomatic relations was not exclusively targeted at the Germans. The extent to which Burckhardt exerted himself on behalf of the British during the Shackling Crisis and his agreement, against his better judgement, to the British proposal of a public declaration, indicates that Burckhardt may have

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<sup>571</sup> ICRC:G25/28/658 – Burckhardt to Norton, 8 December 1943; TNA:PRO FO 916/560 – Berne to FO, 7 December 1943.

<sup>572</sup> ICRC:G25/28/658 – Burckhardt to Norton, 8 December 1943. The British agreed with Burckhardt's views on publicity and so ordered that the press be censored on the matter – TNA:PRO FO 916/560 – FO to Berne, 7 December 1943.

viewed the episode as a means of building a similar relationship with Whitehall to that which he had enjoyed with Berlin for much of the war.

In addition to improving Burckhardt's own image in Britain, this goal was in keeping with the ICRC's new pragmatic policy which, as mentioned in the previous chapter, included plans to strengthen both its London delegation and its relations with the British government. It is no coincidence that these plans were first seriously raised by the Committee's leadership during the early weeks of the Shackling Crisis.<sup>573</sup> That said, as much as the Shackling Crisis provided a medium for the ICRC to display its worth in serving British interests, it also highlighted the concern still held by Whitehall over the Committee's forays into diplomacy. With the discovery in April 1943 of a mass grave containing Polish POWs outside the forest of Katyn, the ICRC was handed a timely opportunity to address this criticism.

### **THE KATYN SILENCE**

The Katyn Affair began on 13 April 1943 when Berlin Radio announced that German authorities in the region of the Russian city of Smolensk had discovered a mass grave in the nearby forest of Katyn. The initial inspection of the grave site by the Germans revealed the bodies of 3,000 Polish army officers who had been missing, presumed captured, since the German-Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939. As the radio broadcast claimed and, as Moscow finally admitted in 1990, the POWs had actually been executed by agents of The People's Commissariat For Internal Affairs (NKVD), on the orders of its chief Lavrenti Beria, during the summer of 1940. When the initial accusation

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<sup>573</sup> ICRC:C14 – Minutes of Central Commission Meeting, 4 November 1942.

of cold-blooded murder was made by the Germans in April 1943 the Soviets replied via their own propaganda medium, the Sovinformburo, declaring that the Poles had in fact been executed by the 'German-Fascist scoundrels'.<sup>574</sup>

This was not the first time the fate of the POWs had been raised. Moscow's forty-nine year denial of the truth about Katyn began following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 and the subsequent resumption of Soviet-Polish relations – now as allies rather than enemies. The first inquiry was made by General Wladyslaw Anders of the Polish Army, who had been released by the Soviets from Lubyanka prison in August 1941. When he realised that many of the men he had served with were not released at the same time, he questioned his new allies as to the whereabouts of the Polish officers who had been held in Soviet POW camps since 1939.

The Soviet response, that the prisoners had been set free when Germany invaded in June 1941 and had since been 'lost track of' by Moscow, was rightly viewed with cynicism by the Poles, who endured a suspicious series of re-affirmations and alterations to this lie over the course of the next year and half. Accordingly, by the time the German announcement concerning the discoveries at Katyn in April 1943 was made, the unresolved question of the fate of the POWs had grown into one of many sore points in Soviet-Polish relations.<sup>575</sup>

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<sup>574</sup> Anne M. Cienciala and Natalia S. Lebedeva, and Materski Wojciech eds, *Katyn: A Crime Without Punishment* (New Haven, 2007) citing 'Communiqué of Sovinformburo', 15 April 1943, p.306-07. For discussion of Beria's involvement see 'Beria Memorandum to Joseph Stalin Proposing the Execution of the Polish Officers', 5 March 1940, cited in above, p.118.

<sup>575</sup> George Sanford, 'The Katyn Massacre and Polish-Soviet Relations 1941-43', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 4, no.1 (2006) 95-111, *Sage Publications*, <http://jch.sagepub.com> (accessed 2 November 2007), p.96. After the war Anders published a book, *Katyn*, in which he challenged the Soviet Union to agree to put the case before an international tribunal. For discussion on the search for the POWs by the Poles prior to 1943 see Louis Fitzgibbon, *Katyn Massacre* (London, 1977), ch.5.



Alive to this situation, the Reich Minister for Propaganda, Josef Goebbels, saw the discovery at Katyn as an opportunity unsettle the Allies by snapping the already strained relations between the Soviets and the Poles. As part of his campaign to conduct 'anti-Bolshevik propaganda in a grand-style', Goebbels ordered 'neutral journalists and Polish intellectuals' as well as members of the Polish Red Cross to be sent to Katyn.<sup>576</sup> The objective of this supposedly neutral medical commission was to conduct an inquiry that would legitimise the German allegations whilst further demonising the Soviets. The chances of this propaganda tactic bringing success were greatly increased on 16 April, when it was announced that the investigators had uncovered a further 1,500 Polish bodies.<sup>577</sup>

The day before the announcement on Berlin Radio of this new find the DRK, undoubtedly under orders from Berlin, requested the ICRC to send a representative to join the excavation team.<sup>578</sup> Ostensibly this was in order to help better identify the bodies. It is more likely, however, that the request was a further attempt by Berlin to legitimise its claims of Soviet barbarism by including an organisation that was regarded as being truly neutral by the rest of the world. Ironically, Berlin may also have sought the ICRC's assistance for the opposite reason.

As previous chapters have shown, from the war's beginning Berlin had displayed a preference for intervention by the ICRC over that of any other neutral organisation, on matters pertaining to anything from POW welfare to disputes over International Humanitarian Law, both of which were issues tied to the Katyn Affair. The support shown by the Germans for Burckhardt's

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<sup>576</sup> Josef Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries: 1942-1943*, ed. and trans. by Louis P. Lochner (New York, 1948), 14 April 1943, p.328.

<sup>577</sup> Fitzgibbon, *Katyn Massacre*, p.110.

<sup>578</sup> ICRC:ACICR/A/CL-06 – Grawitz to Huber, 16 April 1943.

efforts to diffuse the Shackling Crisis in the months prior to the Katyn discovery indicates that this opinion of Geneva as being on "their side" was still prevalent in Berlin in 1943. In seeking to validate their claims of Soviet guilt, therefore, the Germans would have found the ICRC to be an attractive and, as the investigation progressed, necessary option.

This was owing to the attitude of Wacław Lachert, the Polish Red Cross representative on the ground at Katyn, who, unlike his colleagues at the DRK, had resisted German attempts to bastardise the Polish Red Cross into becoming a mere tool of the Third Reich. When asked by the Germans to make a public declaration confirming that the Soviets had committed the massacre, Lachert refused to be drawn into what was clearly a propaganda exercise. Despite being informed of the Soviets' guilt by Polish Red Cross inspectors at Katyn, Lachert evaded Berlin's request by replying that to issue that kind of definite statement he would need two witnesses to each of the murders.<sup>579</sup> It was only after Lachert's refusal to co-operate with Berlin that the ICRC was contacted.

As testament to the validity of Goebbels' belief that the world viewed the ICRC to be credible, the Germans were not the only ones to request Geneva's intervention. The Polish government-in-exile, which had been based in London under the leadership of General Władysław Sikorski since 1939, was understandably keen to get to the bottom of the Katyn Affair and so sought to gain clarification over what had happened from sources beyond Berlin's mixed medical commission. Accordingly, on 17 April Prince Radziwiłł, the Polish Red

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<sup>579</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.427, 437; Cienciala et al, *Katyn*, p.311 citing 'Report of the Secretary of the Polish Red Cross, Kazimierz Skarżyński, on the PRC Technical Commission's Visit to Smolensk and Katyn', 15 April 1943.

Cross representative in Geneva, requested on behalf of his government that the ICRC launch its own independent inquiry into the Katyn affair.<sup>580</sup>

The reaction of the British to this development was one of disappointment edged by a small, yet very real, dose of fear. The latter emotion was owing to Britain's alliance with the Soviets who, in the spring of 1943, were in the midst of a massive offensive to capitalise on their recent victory over the Germans at Stalingrad. At such a crucial moment in the European conflict it was perceived as disastrous by the British for the Russians to be accused of mass murder comparable with that committed by their German enemies. Accordingly, the response of the Foreign Office when informed of a pending ICRC investigation was to have a 'loophole' sentence placed into the official British statement indicating that the accusations against the Russians could simply be a construct of German propaganda. This was despite the fact that both Churchill and Alexander Cadogan suspected that the Soviets were indeed guilty.<sup>581</sup>

Tempering their suspicion, the British decided that the only way to preserve their alliance and overcome Goebbels' plan was cautiously to follow the Soviet line. As part of this display of solidarity with Moscow, Churchill opted to attack the ICRC when he wrote to Stalin on 25 April saying that Whitehall would 'certainly oppose rigorously any "investigation" by the International Committee of the Red Cross *or any other body in any territory under German*

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<sup>580</sup> ICRC:ACICR/A/CL-06 – Radziwill to Huber, 17 April 1943.

<sup>581</sup> Churchill himself confessed that 'the German revelations are probably true. The Bolsheviks can be very cruel'. Cadogan also pondered how the British, being aware of Soviet guilt, could possibly talk of prosecuting German war criminals – *Cadogan Diaries*, 15 April 1943, 18 June 1943, p.521, 537. For discussion of the propaganda value the British found in promoting German guilt see 'The Katyn Massacre: An SOE Perspective' *FCO Historians*, no.10 (1996) <http://collections.europarchive.org/tna/20080205132101/http://www.fco.gov.uk> (accessed 10 May 2009).

*authority*'.<sup>582</sup> Although he showed little support for Stalin's absurd opinion that the Poles, the Germans and the ICRC were using Katyn to construct an anti-Soviet conspiracy, Churchill clearly felt the need to tap into this paranoia by taking the Soviet line that the ICRC was susceptible to influence from Berlin and so could not be trusted.<sup>583</sup>

One wonders whether Churchill was being sincere in his suggestions of ICRC-Nazi collusion. In addition to this idea having been raised since the start of the war by Whitehall's POW departments and MEW, Churchill and the entire cabinet had more recently shown displeasure at Burckhardt's close dealings with the Nazi leadership. That, coupled with knowledge at the Foreign Office, from those who worked alongside Burckhardt in Danzig, of his hatred of Communism and distrust of the Soviets would have made the idea of the ICRC being sympathetic to the German cause one worth considering.<sup>584</sup> That said, there is no evidence that this thought – if indeed it was considered – was ever sincerely committed to paper.

What is clear, however, is that there was definite concern in Whitehall that the Committee, already deemed to be, at the very least, susceptible to German influence, would follow its tendency to involve itself in matters beyond its mandate by naïvely agreeing to Berlin's request. Such an action, it was feared, would serve only further to infuriate the Soviets.

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<sup>582</sup> Italics are my emphasis – *Churchill and Roosevelt*, vol.2, C-284, 25 April 1943, p.193.

<sup>583</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/34570 – FO Circular Memorandum to Foreign Embassies, 26 April 1943. This idea was heavily promulgated in the Soviet press at this time owing to the seemingly co-ordinated request by both the Poles and the Germans for an inquiry. There is very little evidence to support the idea that this was anything other than a co-incidence – TNA:PRO FO 371/34571 – *Izvestia* Editorial (text of broadcast), 27 April 1943.

<sup>584</sup> For discussion of Burckhardt's hatred of Communism see Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.308; Forsythe, *Humanitarians*, p.47.

The degree to which the ICRC was put under a microscope by the British on this account is evidenced by the existence of a special report on the Committee's involvement in the Katyn Affair that was produced for the benefit of the Foreign Office on 29 April. This document, compiled by the Political Warfare Executive (PWE), contained a series of intelligence and media reports outlining the progress of the ICRC's deliberations over whether or not to respond to the German and Polish requests, as well as analysis on what the outcome of the ICRC's reply would mean for Polish-Soviet relations.<sup>585</sup>

The reason for such scrutiny was that by that stage in the affair the question of ICRC involvement had taken on a new and more potent significance. As a measure of how little Moscow trusted the ICRC and how much it feared what the Committee's investigation might uncover, an enraged Stalin threatened to cut diplomatic ties with the Poles on 24 April unless Sikorski retracted his appeal to Geneva. Sikorski refused, and so ties were officially severed between the two allies on 25 April.<sup>586</sup>

As the PWE gathered its intelligence, Eden began frantic attempts to persuade Sikorski to withdraw the request to the ICRC. An indication of Whitehall's desperation to resolve the issue is evidenced by a letter Churchill sent to Stalin on 25 April, in which he stated that Sikorski would retract the appeal.<sup>587</sup> This was despite the fact that a formal request from Eden to the Polish ambassador, Edward Raczynski, was not sent until five days later. Eden's informal appeal for the Poles to back down was, in fact, met with only a

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<sup>585</sup> TNA:PRO FO 898/227– Report on ICRC in Katyn Affair, 29 April 1943.

<sup>586</sup> Stalin had gone so far as to inform Eden that he would drop the notion of breaking off relations with the Poles if Sikorski retracted his request to the ICRC – *Cadogan Diaries*, 24 April 1943, p.523.

<sup>587</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/34570 – Churchill to Stalin, 25 April 1943.

partial agreement from Sikorski and it was not until 4 May that the Poles officially withdrew their request for the Committee to launch an inquiry.<sup>588</sup>

It is apparent from this sequence of events that the ICRC's involvement in the Katyn Affair was a significant factor in the British handling of the issue. Indeed, it was the opinion of the Foreign Office that the Polish request for ICRC intervention was nothing short of being 'the immediate cause of the crisis'.<sup>589</sup> There was more to Whitehall's concern, however, than simply keeping its Allies at peace. The British quite rightly suspected their Soviet ally of guilt and were themselves aware of their own complicity in covering up the crime by following Stalin's line.<sup>590</sup> Apprehension over this delicate situation being made public, plus the lingering suspicions in Whitehall over the Committee's apparent closeness to and, more importantly, capacity to be manipulated by, Berlin, would only have added to the British sense of anxiety over what the ICRC might uncover.

If one considers Burckhardt's unwanted efforts throughout the Shackling Crisis, the British fear that the ICRC would throw itself with typical enthusiasm into the Katyn issue was understandable. This was particularly so given that, on 18 April, the Foreign Office received word from Berne that, although the Committee planned to reject the German request, it would be more receptive to an appeal for an investigation from the Poles.<sup>591</sup>

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<sup>588</sup> *Cadogan Diaries*, 30 April 1943, p.525; *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.429.

<sup>589</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/34573 – FO to Moscow, 1 May 1943.

<sup>590</sup> Sanford, 'Soviet-Polish Relations', p.110. The British ambassador to the Polish Government in Exile, Sir Owen O'Malley, was the greatest opponent of Whitehall's pro-Soviet line. Cadogan was similarly minded, questioning in his diary 'how can we discuss with Russians execution of German "war criminals", when we have condoned this?' – *Cadogan Diaries*, 18 June 1943, p.537.

<sup>591</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/34568 – Berne to FO, 18 April 1943.

Rather than being interpreted as a sign that the Committee was not as gullible as it appeared, the British instead saw this report as evidence that the ICRC would in some way get involved and might uncover the truth behind the Katyn Affair. It was fear of the truth – perhaps more so than fear of the Committee being manipulated by Berlin – that served as the catalyst for the PWE's report, which eventually calmed British fears on 29 April by stating that the ICRC's 'reply is really a negative one'.<sup>592</sup> It is fair to say that until this report was received Whitehall waited anxiously, expecting the ever-enthusiastic and politically meddlesome ICRC to answer positively to the Polish and, possibly, German requests. It is clear from ICRC sources, however, that the British had nothing to fear.

Much like Lachert at the Polish Red Cross, the Committee was mindful from the beginning of the political weight attached to the Katyn Affair. At a time when the ICRC was trying to ingratiate itself with the British and, moreover, focus on practical activities, this burden was deemed to be too much to bear. The Committee never had any real intention of getting involved in either Goebbel's propaganda games or Polish attempts to uncover the truth. In coming to the decision to reject both appeals for an inquiry, the ICRC's reasoning was notably pragmatic, politically-minded and self-serving.

As early as 19 April the Committee's leadership concluded that any affirmative response to the DRK's request might anger the Soviets. This was of particular concern for Geneva as, since the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, it had been campaigning unsuccessfully for Moscow – which was not a signatory to the Geneva Convention – to allow the ICRC to conduct relief activities on behalf of POWs on the Eastern Front.<sup>593</sup> Kid-glove treatment of the Soviets was, therefore, a policy of the ICRC leadership at this time.

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<sup>592</sup> TNA:PRO FO 898/227 – Report on ICRC in Katyn Affair, 29 April 1943.

In subsequent Committee meetings over the course of mid-April the argument for non-intervention was also raised in relation to the Polish request. In this instance, the Committee had recourse to Huber's solidly legalistic argument that the ICRC was not authorised to conduct a unilateral investigation of this nature without the consent of all belligerents involved in the matter.<sup>594</sup> This rationale formed the backbone of Geneva's official reply to both the Poles and the Germans on 23 April, which stated that the Committee was

willing, in principle, and provided that all parties concerned ask them to do so, to lend their assistance in the appointment of neutral experts, in accordance with the memorandum which the Committee sent on 12 September 1939 to the belligerent states, and by which, immediately upon the outbreak of the war, the Committee established the principles according to which they would be able to take part, if need be, in making investigations.<sup>595</sup>

Put simply, the Committee would only involve itself in the Katyn investigation – and then, only with the participation of other neutral bodies – if 'all parties', meaning the Soviets, agreed to its involvement. For a number of reasons, this was one of the ICRC's most shrewd and calculated diplomatic moves of the Second World War.

As has been argued by Fitzgibbon, the Committee's primary motivation for distancing itself from the Katyn Affair was its need to re-establish relations with the Kremlin, which had stopped responding to the ICRC's direct communications in December 1941.<sup>596</sup> Accordingly, the ICRC's response

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<sup>593</sup> ICRC:ACICR/A/CL-06 – Minutes of Committee Meeting, 19 April 1943. For discussion of the ICRC's relations with Moscow see Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.509-521.

<sup>594</sup> ICRC:C11 – Minutes of Committee Bureau Meeting, 21 April 1943.

<sup>595</sup> ICRC:ACICR/A/CL-06 – ICRC Public Communiqué, 23 April 1943.

<sup>596</sup> Fitzgibbon, *Katyn Massacre*, p.115. The breakdown in ICRC-Soviet relations began when the Kremlin refused to respond to the ICRC's proposal for the setting up of a delegation in Moscow on 18 December 1941. Subsequent attempts by the ICRC to get Washington and London to



demanding Soviet involvement, to which the Committee knew the ever obstinate and undoubtedly guilty Moscow would not agree, was designed to be rejected.<sup>597</sup>

As much as the response was intended to preserve what remained of the ICRC's flimsy relations with Moscow, it was also designed, albeit subtly, as a statement of purpose. The clever wording made it clear to any who doubted the ICRC's resolve that it was indeed authorised, capable and willing to investigate Katyn. This not only placed the ICRC above the issue but implied that the fault for a lack of investigation lay, not with the Committee, but with the squabbling governments involved. As in the Shackling Crisis, the Committee's "prestige" needed to be preserved in the eyes of the belligerents, upon whose co-operation the ICRC's new pragmatic mandate ultimately depended.

Another factor in shaping Geneva's response is one seldom considered by historians. Namely, how the ICRC's conduct in the Katyn Affair fitted into the context of the Committee's push during 1942-43 both to expand its operations and better serve British interests. If one takes into account the ICRC's decision in late 1942 to improve its relations with Britain, Burckhardt's on-going involvement in the Shackling Crisis and the ICRC's campaign – in

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persuade their Soviet ally to agree to ratify the Geneva Convention and allow the ICRC into its territories failed and as such, the ICRC's dealings with Moscow had to be made through the Soviet embassy in Ankara. On the same day that the first bodies were discovered at Katyn, Huber received a negative reply from the Foreign Office to his latest appeal for the British to exert influence on the Soviets in this matter. As a consequence of Moscow's attitude, the Committee's impact on the Eastern Front was minimal compared to its activities in other theatres of the war – ICRC:G85 1048 – FO to Huber, 13 April 1943; Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.510-515.

<sup>597</sup> In 1944 an independent inquiry concluded that the Polish Red Cross had sent a telegram to the ICRC upon first seeing the Katyn grave site, declaring that 'according to the papers found on the corpses the murders must have taken place about the months of March and April, 1940'. Given Soviet occupation of the territory at this time, this was an indication by the Polish Red Cross of Soviet guilt. As such, the ICRC would have believed, based on this information and its own experiences with the Russians, that they were guilty of the murders – TNA:PRO PREM 3/353 – Professor D.L. Savoy's independent report into Katyn Massacre, 17 February 1944 .

the face of British deference to the Protecting Power – to organise exchanges of German and British POWs throughout 1943, it becomes clear that the ICRC's policy of practical and local activities had been extended by this time into areas of "humanitarian diplomacy".<sup>598</sup> Success in the aforementioned areas, all of which concerned British POWs, was both achievable and worth pursuing in the interests of improving British-ICRC relations. Considered against this clear objective the Katyn Affair, mired in Polish-Soviet antagonism and German propaganda, was an unwanted diversion for the ICRC.

It is impossible to know whether the more naïve and well-meaning Committee of 1940 would have embraced the Katyn Affair with greater enthusiasm. However, we can conclude by looking at Katyn in the wider context of the ICRC's policy and actions during 1943, that the Committee was aware that to respond affirmatively to the Polish and German requests was to pursue an idealistic course that may have been both beyond Geneva's capabilities and disastrous to its relations with the British and the Soviets. Much like the proposed Holocaust *démarche*, therefore, Katyn was a complex and difficult issue from which the increasingly pragmatic ICRC chose to walk away, albeit with a more convincing argument for doing so.

In addition to favouring the pursuit of issues relating to British POWs, there may also have been a realisation, in Burckhardt's mind in particular, that in choosing not to participate in the Katyn Affair the ICRC could earn some much needed respect from the British. The fact that Burckhardt chose to notify Moscow via the Foreign Office rather than Geneva's usual line to the Soviets in Ankara, that the Committee had been 'absolutely correct in the matter',

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<sup>598</sup> The ICRC launched a POW exchange initiative only days before the Katyn Affair – TNA:PRO FO 916/613 – WO to FO, 26 March 1943.

indicates that he wanted to make sure both the Russians *and* the British knew that the ICRC was on “their” side in the Katyn Affair.<sup>599</sup> The British, however, needed more than a display of discretion on the part of Geneva for their suspicions of the ICRC to abate.

### **AMBITIONS AND SUSPICIONS**

Considering Burckhardt’s often difficult history with the British his efforts to work on their behalf during 1942-43 seem, at a glance, quite peculiar. This is particularly so if we follow the view cherished by some historians that the Euro-centric, German-Swiss Burckhardt, reciprocated the antipathy of the British.<sup>600</sup> We cannot know for certain what Burckhardt’s personal feelings towards the British were, though it is more than likely that the refusal of Churchill’s regime to entertain peace proposals and MEW’s interference with ICRC aims would have impacted negatively on Burckhardt’s perception. That said, Burckhardt’s private thoughts on the British were of little consequence. What mattered were his actions.

Burckhardt was more aware than anyone of what the British thought of him during the war – by his own recollection he believed he had been followed by British Secret Service agents in Portugal whilst en route to London in December 1941.<sup>601</sup> Bearing these suspicions in mind and the irritation the ICRC’s expansion was causing to the blockade authorities, the politician in Burckhardt knew that, with his rise to prominence within the Committee,

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<sup>599</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/34573 – Lisbon to FO, 28 April 1943. After a year of receiving no replies to its direct communications with Moscow, the ICRC resolved to contact the Soviets via their embassies in certain countries. Although the Soviet ambassador in London, Ivan Maisky, was contacted by Burckhardt in late 1941 to this effect, this line proved useless and in early 1943 the ICRC decided to focus on the Soviet embassies in Ankara and Tehran instead – *ICRC Report*, vol.1, pp.430-432.

<sup>600</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, pp.302-03; Favez, *Holocaust*, p.285.

<sup>601</sup> Wylie, *Britain and Switzerland*, p.296.

relations between Geneva and Whitehall could only get worse. This, in turn, would inevitably lead to a decline in the Committee's ability to pursue its new pragmatic policy. As the emerging leader of the ICRC therefore, Burckhardt undertook throughout 1942-43 to improve his standing in Britain in order to improve that of the Committee.

There were also wider and more long-term matters to be considered.

Burckhardt viewed the idea of improving relations with not just the British, but the Allies as a whole, who by this time were looking more a certainty to win the war, as a means of bolstering the ICRC's post-war image, concern for which he raised as early as October 1943. Beyond anxiety over the reputation of the Committee itself, Burckhardt's emphasis on pleasing the British may also have been born of more personal considerations. In particular, he needed to cleanse his own post-war reputation of the taint of having been pro-German, which had been hanging over his head since his time in Danzig and which, as Jean-Claude Favez has argued, Burckhardt endeavoured to 'correct' through weeding out incriminating material from the ICRC Archives and his own papers after the war.<sup>602</sup>

This campaign by Burckhardt to repair his own image started years earlier, running in conjunction with his efforts to improve British-ICRC relations as his power rose in Geneva from late 1942 onwards. It was during this time that Burckhardt tipped off Paul Squire about his knowledge of the Holocaust in order to get word to the Americans; went out of his way to broker a cessation to the shackling; and later made clear to the Foreign Office that the Committee would not rock Whitehall's boat over the Katyn Affair.

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<sup>602</sup> Favez, *Holocaust*, p.90, 312n.

It was no coincidence that towards the end of 1943 Burckhardt – in yet another clear breach of ICRC neutrality – also provided information on conditions within Germany to Allen Dulles, the head of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in Switzerland. Dulles noted that during a recent visit by Burckhardt to Berlin on Red Cross business – presumably his meeting with Ribbentrop over the shackling issue – he had taken soundings about the mood in Germany, the prospect of Hitler being usurped by Himmler and, most importantly, the possibility of the Germans making a secret peace deal with the Soviet Union. Burckhardt further noted, with his usual sense of fatalism, the ‘self delusion’ of those in Germany who could not realise that defeat was inevitable.<sup>603</sup> Clearly Burckhardt suffered from no such delusion and so he began to trim his, and the ICRC’s, sails to the changing winds of the war.

The problem, of course, was that the British were not similarly concerned about reviewing their opinion of either Burckhardt or his ICRC. In regards to the former, first impressions clearly mattered. In late 1943 the Swiss Federal Council recalled Walter Thurnheer, its highly unpopular minister in London, leading to discussion over a possible replacement.<sup>604</sup> Two main candidates were considered. Paul Ruegger, an ICRC delegate who had worked closely with Max Huber since his recall from the post of Swiss minister in Rome in January 1942, was one option. The other was Burckhardt. Both, as testament to the fluidity of the relationship between Berne and Geneva, were considered despite not even being official members of the Swiss government.

The Foreign Office discussion over both candidates is telling. Fears that Ruegger’s wife was a fascist and that the man himself was ‘effeminate’, ‘over

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<sup>603</sup> Neal H. Petersen, *From Hitler’s Doorstep: The Wartime Intelligence Reports of Allen Dulles, 1942-1945* (Pennsylvania, 1996), Document 2-70, Telegram 1151-53, 26 November 1943, pp.162-163.

<sup>604</sup> For details of Thurnheer see Wylie, *Britain and Switzerland*, p.78.

pleasant and too anxious to be all things to all men',<sup>605</sup> were put aside in the face of long-held and, clearly unalterable, views of Burckhardt as being too inclined to take the 'good German line'.<sup>606</sup> One Foreign Office official bluntly minuted that in addition to the problem of Burckhardt's sympathies for German peace-makers, he 'didn't like Dr. Burckhardt as a man either'.<sup>607</sup> For his part Clifford Norton voiced support for Burckhardt, which, although presented as a matter of him picking the lesser of two evils, was likely an attempt by Norton to get the troublesome would-be diplomat out of his hair.

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Anthony Eden presented the most reasonable view, albeit coloured, like the rest of the Foreign Office, by past experiences. Having recalled Burckhardt's controversial trip to London in 1941 and his 'close contacts with Germans' whilst at Danzig in the late 1930s, Eden thought the appointment of Burckhardt to London would prove embarrassing to the British and their Allies.

Eden's concern came from Whitehall's on-going campaign to reassure the ever paranoid Stalin that no separate peace deal with Berlin would be entertained by the Western Allies.<sup>609</sup> Even without this quite reasonable

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<sup>605</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/39852 – Berne to FO, 30 March 1944; FO to Berne, 5 March 1944.

<sup>606</sup> Ibid. – FO to Berne, 1 April 1944.

<sup>607</sup> Ibid. – FO Minute, 31 March 1944.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid. – Berne to FO, 4 April 1944; Berne to FO, 30 March 1944.

<sup>609</sup> This fear of Stalin's was first heightened after Rudolf Hess' peace-seeking flight to Scotland in May 1941, and the subsequent British deception campaign against Moscow that was designed to convince the Russians that Hitler would betray the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. Despite forming an alliance with the British and Americans later that year, Stalin continued to believe that his new allies were stalling on the planned invasion of Europe and, until the final days of the war, he was paranoid that the British and Americans would broker a separate peace, ally with the Germans and turn on the Soviet Union – Jonathan, Haslam, 'Stalin's Fears of a Separate Peace, 1942', *Intelligence and National Security*, 8, no.4 (1993), *Informaworld*, <http://www.informaworld.com> (accessed 12 January 2008); Schmidt, Rainer F., 'The Marketing of Rudolf Hess: A Key to the Preventive War Debate?', *War in History*, 5, no.1 (1998) 62-83, *Sage Publications*, <http://wih.sagepub.com> (accessed 12 January 2008); Waller, John H., *The Unseen War in Europe: Espionage and Conspiracy in the Second World War*, New York: Random House, 1996, pp.265-66.

argument, it is clear from the attitudes recorded in the file, that Burckhardt's reputation as pro-German had been irreversibly established to his detriment in the preceding years. Even George Warner's recollections of Burckhardt being pro-Mussolini during the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1936 were raised in the discussion.<sup>610</sup> Ruegger was duly appointed in May 1944 and Burckhardt, despite his best efforts, continued to be viewed without favour in Whitehall.

In terms of the Committee's overall reputation the story was not too dissimilar. Far from engendering a greater sense of faith and trust in Geneva, the actions of the ICRC, both political and practical, during 1942-43 served only further to raise Whitehall's hostility towards, and suspicion of, the Committee. This is evidenced by the fact that in addition to the on-going reservations of Burckhardt's political affiliations, greater scrutiny was also placed by the British on the work of lesser delegates on the ground. Owing to the classification of British Intelligence files it is impossible to know when precisely the British began to monitor Red Cross delegates. However, the surveillance of Burckhardt on his trip to London in December 1941 – which appears to have been the first major security scare for Whitehall regarding the ICRC – seems as likely a time as any for this practice to have begun. Support for this conclusion can be found in the poverty of evidence that has been declassified regarding Allied monitoring of the ICRC.

In January 1942, a month after surveillance was conducted on Burckhardt, new ICRC delegates were being screened by the British, on the orders of the War Office, before taking up their overseas postings.<sup>611</sup> The ICRC's lack of protest and indeed, willingness to comply with the British by sending the relevant background information indicates that the Committee had accepted

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<sup>610</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/39852 – Warner to Cadogan, 1 May 1944.

<sup>611</sup> See generally TNA:PRO FO 916/309.

such measures as a consequence of its operations and staff expanding across the globe.<sup>612</sup> Although this compliance helped the process of screening run smoothly for the most part, there were instances in which the British were unsatisfied with the proposed delegates. In far off Madagascar for example, the prospective delegate Paul Giroud, was put under surveillance owing to his alleged 'pro-Axis sympathies in 1940'.<sup>613</sup> Nothing came of this monitoring of Giroud. There were, however, instances in which these security measures bore fruit, albeit not immediately.

One of the more notable security scares concerned Hans Bon, a hotelier from St Moritz, who was appointed delegate of the ICRC in Cairo in April 1942. As testament to the problems with the British screening process, Bon was approved by the War Office on 18 April.<sup>614</sup> Soon after, however, the British were informed that the Bon family had a long history of pro-Nazism and, by December 1943, MI5 had concluded that Hans had 'the closest Nazi contacts of all the family'. The British subsequently placed 'discreet pressure' on Geneva to have him removed.<sup>615</sup>

The discovery of Bon followed the approval by the DPW of tighter measures to be taken by British Intelligence and the War Office in screening new ICRC delegates.<sup>616</sup> The fact that, even prior to this tightening of security measures, the aforementioned observations of delegates in new postings were being made indicates that the British security services, like the rest of Whitehall, responded to the ICRC's expansion with greater scrutiny and control. This

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<sup>612</sup> The first instance of this information being request was in January 1942, when Haccius sought British permission for the appointment of a Swiss national as ICRC delegate in Malaya – TNA:PRO FO 916/309 – Haccius to Satow, 5 January 1942.

<sup>613</sup> Ibid. – WO to FO, 4 September 1942; FO to WO, 14 September 1942.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid. – WO to FO, 18 April 1942.

<sup>615</sup> TNA:PRO KV 4/49 – Report on Switzerland, Sweden and Neutrality, 22 December 1944.

<sup>616</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/309 – DPW Minute, 28 November 1944.



would explain why the lion's share of declassified information on this matter concerns delegates who had been posted to areas of operation that were either new, or being enhanced by the ICRC during 1942-43.<sup>617</sup>

One such area which, owing to military operations, was of understandable concern to the Allies, was North Africa. Even before the Hans Bon affair, the ICRC's Cairo delegation had been brought under British scrutiny when, in July 1941, the office of the Commander in Chief Mediterranean requested that Geneva do something about its delegates Georges Vaucher and Philip Junod, who had been quarrelling with each other and neglecting their duties. The delegates were soon removed.<sup>618</sup> This offence by the ICRC was eclipsed in late 1942 when the increase in military operations in the North African theatre led both the British, and their new American allies, to more serious concerns over Geneva's activities there.

At the same time that the British were looking into Hans Bon, a general order put out by Allied Force Headquarters (AFHQ)<sup>619</sup> in December 1943 called for all ICRC delegates in North Africa to be 'treated with considerable circumspection' as they were not considered to be 'reliable' from an Allied point of view. In March 1944 further orders came down from AFHQ for increased censorship of ICRC correspondence being sent from Algiers to Geneva.<sup>620</sup> The full extent of these concerns in North Africa was not made

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<sup>617</sup> By May 1942 the ICRC had 42 delegates posted beyond Switzerland. 7 were in Europe, 6 in Africa, 7 in Asia, 5 in the South Pacific and six in North America. Following the outbreak of war in the Pacific in December 1941, extra duties fell upon the ICRC's delegations in the Sub-Continent and Australia – Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.522.

<sup>618</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/113 – C in C Mediterranean To WO, 19 July 1941.

<sup>619</sup> Allied operational command centre for the Mediterranean theatre under the command of General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

<sup>620</sup> TNA:PRO WO 204/779 – AFHQ Cable, 19 December 1943; AFHQ Cable, 15 March 1944.

apparent until 1996 when material, held by OSS, documenting wartime suspicions of the ICRC's involvement with the Nazis was declassified.

The accusations were severe. Of the forty-nine people named in the documents, twenty-one were identified as delegates of the ICRC. Their alleged crimes ranged from the laundering of seized Jewish assets to conducting espionage on behalf of Berlin, and most of these activities were alleged to have occurred in North Africa, Turkey and Italy. Incensed at the accusation, Geneva – already reeling from public criticism of its actions regarding the Holocaust – launched an inquiry into the matter, the findings of which were made public in 1996. It was found that only eighteen of the people named had worked for the ICRC and of them only three had committed 'reprehensible acts'. None of the three guilty parties were full time members of the ICRC; all of them worked in a purely voluntary capacity and were extra staff taken on by Geneva to handle its expanding duties. The remaining fifteen were declared to have been accused on the basis of little more than a 'total ignorance of the organisation's role and work'.<sup>621</sup>

The ICRC's conclusions have, to date, not been challenged and there is little reason to doubt the Committee's assertion that the OSS concerns rested primarily on a misinterpretation of the ICRC's activities. Aside from the fact that forty-six people were wrongly accused of partaking in illicit activities, there were also some basic errors made regarding the composition of the ICRC. One of the named individuals – Paul Burckhard – appears to have been confused by the OSS with Carl Burckhardt, a mistake which in part validates

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<sup>621</sup> François Bugnion, 'ICRC Action During the Second World War', *International Review of the Red Cross*, no.317, (1997) 562-567; Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, pp.701-702; Tom Bower, *Blood Money: The Swiss, the Nazis and the Looted Billions* (London, 1997), p.40.

the ICRC's contention that the accusations were made by people who did not actually understand what they were investigating.<sup>622</sup>

This and other errors on the part of the OSS are perhaps best explained by the fact that North Africa was the first area in which the Americans had close interaction with the ICRC during the war. This factor seems particularly pertinent if one considers similar misunderstandings on the part of the British during their initial relations with the Committee during the war's early stages.

<sup>623</sup> The mention of Burckhardt, however, also indicates that despite knowing little of the Committee, the OSS had been drawn to him, perhaps on the advice of British Intelligence, which had begun collaborating with the OSS in mid 1942.<sup>624</sup> In the absence of hard evidence, this must remain conjecture. At the very least, however, it seems highly probable that the suspicions of the Americans were either shared with, or influenced by, British Intelligence, which appears to have held similar reservations to those of the OSS regarding the ICRC's North African operations.

The passing of information – presumably of a military nature – was one of the more prevalent concerns of the British. Since 1939 an agreement had been in effect between Whitehall and the ICRC, permitting the latter to make use of the Swiss diplomatic bag for the purpose of transmitting Red Cross correspondence.<sup>625</sup> In 1943, however, reservations were raised by the Foreign Office over a similar arrangement for the ICRC's delegation in Cairo. Tellingly,

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<sup>622</sup> Bugnion, 'ICRC Action', p.566. For discussion of the OSS files see Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, pp.701-703.

<sup>623</sup> See Ch.1, pp.21-52.

<sup>624</sup> The initial Anglo-American intelligence collaboration in this theatre began in mid 1942 in preparation for Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa – Jay Jakub, *Spies and Saboteurs: Anglo-American Collaboration and Rivalry in Human Intelligence Collection and Special Operations, 1940-45* (London, 1999), pp.66-67.

<sup>625</sup> See Ch.1, p.83.

approval for ICRC use of the bag came only on 9 September – the day after the capitulation of Italy – and even then, only with the proviso that ICRC correspondence be subjected to more intense censorship.<sup>626</sup> These concerns are remarkably similar to those raised by the Americans. When considered alongside both the OSS' accusations and further concerns raised by Allied Force Headquarters (AFHQ) over ICRC correspondence in the weeks prior to D-Day, it becomes evident that suspicion of the ICRC by the Allies was not just a reaction to the Committee's expansion during the war's middle years. It was also a direct and reasonable response to the increase and intensification of Allied military activity in Europe.<sup>627</sup> Of detriment to British-ICRC relations, however, was the fact that the results of this scrutiny in many ways confirmed British fears of the Committee's inability to handle its expansion.

Allied observations of the delegates abroad indicated that in order to facilitate its expansion Geneva was forced to hurriedly seek the services of individuals who were not necessarily 'politically reliable'. In the cases of two delegates in Cairo, Georges Kuhne and Marc Seidl, for example, the ICRC was so tardy in appointing them that Geneva sent a request for passes for both men to visit POW camps before either had been screened or approved for despatch to Egypt by the British.<sup>628</sup> Understandably, this negligence added to Allied concerns over the ICRC's North African operation and Georges Kuhne was subsequently mentioned in the OSS' report. Even the author of the ICRC's rebuttal to the OSS' claims hints that the scale of the Committee's wartime operations may have contributed to the Allies' suspicions.<sup>629</sup> Considering this,

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<sup>626</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/614 – FO to Cairo, 29 July 1943; 9 September 1943.

<sup>627</sup> TNA:PRO WO 204/779 – AFHQ Cable, 4 April 1944. A report on intercepted ICRC messages was compiled on 12 June 1944 – Communication Censorship To AFHQ, 12 June 1944.

<sup>628</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/613 – PWD to Haccius, 12 October 1943; Pourtales to Satow, 18 October 1943.

<sup>629</sup> There were 180 ICRC delegates posted overseas during the war, spread out over 92 separate delegations. This information was presented in the author's concluding paragraph, which in

we are left with the question of whether Burckhardt's lofty ambitions for the ICRC were, as the British believed, beyond Geneva's capabilities.

Certainly there were indiscretions both in terms of shipping procedures and delegate activities. Indeed, one wonders how damaging Burckhardt's well-meaning contacts with Allen Dulles were to Allied perceptions of the stringency of Red Cross neutrality. If, however, one considers the minimal damage caused by these incidents compared to the substantial humanitarian achievements that resulted from the Committee's expansion, any argument portraying the ICRC as politically unreliable on the basis of a few dubious individuals appears trivial. Moreover, the expansion of the Committee's activities was a natural and, most certainly, necessary reaction by Geneva to the growing scale and intensification of the war during its middle years. As this intensification rose to its bloody crescendo in 1944-45, however, the capabilities of the expanded and improved Committee were challenged as never before and British-ICRC relations – frayed to a slender thread by years of poor co-operation – finally reached their breaking point.

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listing the achievements of the ICRC in terms of facts and figures emphasised the scope of the Committee's operations as compared to the three individuals who were found to have been at fault – Bugnion, 'ICRC Action', pp.565-567.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **THE REICH COLLAPSES**

#### **THE ICRC IN THE FIRING LINE**

By early 1944 the ICRC's operations in Europe were sprawling and multifaceted. The foundation for this expansion, and the success it engendered, lay in the more focused and pragmatic approach adopted by the Committee towards its work over the course of the previous year. This approach brought improved efficiency to Geneva's handling of its more traditional fields of parcel delivery and camp inspections, as well as the establishment of important innovations such as the White Ships and the Concentration Camp Parcel Service, both of which were born of the ICRC's increasing confidence and autonomy. As was so often the case, however, the variable nature of the conflict in Europe was never far from threatening the stability of these operations. When the tide of war began to turn inexorably against the Axis in 1943, the ICRC's operations were brought under increasing threat as the space, quite literally, between the Committee's humanitarian missions and the Allies' military activities narrowed. This inevitable clash of objectives defined British-ICRC relations during the final year of the Second World War.

Prior to D-Day the primary medium through which Allied military operations interfered with the ICRC's activities was the bombing campaign, which by early 1943 involved sizable American forces joining the RAF in the skies above the Third Reich.<sup>630</sup> The "collateral damage" implicit in the Allied bombing

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<sup>630</sup> The first all American air raid of the European war was an attack on Wilhelmshaven on 27 January 1943 – Read, *Killing Skies*, pp.143-44.

strategy was felt by the ICRC as early as November 1942, when the parcel ship *Padua* was hit by an incendiary bomb whilst at anchor in Genoa. The final fate of the ship provides an example of the dangers that also existed on the high seas. Having been repaired and re-floated, the *Padua* was sunk almost a year later by a submerged mine off Marseilles in the Golfe du Lion, resulting in the loss of six men and all the Red Cross parcels in her hull.<sup>631</sup>

The bombing and later sinking of the *Padua* were the first major instances in which Allied, rather than Axis, military actions inflicted damage on Red Cross shipping. Perhaps owing to the fact that, unlike the Italians in 1941, the Allies were first-time offenders, the ICRC showed remarkable restraint in dealing with this first infraction. The Committee, acknowledging that the ship's fate was an accident of war, confined itself to merely notifying the British what had happened and accepting the apology offered by Whitehall. The British, in turn, showed their concern by proposing that all relief ships plying the Marseille route be degaussed to lessen the chances of their being hit by magnetic mines. Of course, this was provided that any ships mooring at Gibraltar for degaussing adhered to strict security procedures, the details of which took the Admiralty nearly a year to agree upon.<sup>632</sup>

The prevarication over the degaussing reflected the Admiralty's overall outlook on the problem of safety for Red Cross ships. When Colonel Brown at the BRC noted that the *Padua*'s sinking was owing to a stray, floating mine and not a magnetic one the point was not lost on the Admiralty, which responded by stating that degaussing was the best that could be offered, given that 'it is not possible for the Admiralty to guarantee that the enemy

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<sup>631</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/618 – Geneva to FO, 29 October 1943; *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.139.

<sup>632</sup> TNA:PRO ADM 1/16061 – ADM Minutes, 12 November 1943; ADM Memo, 1 September 1944.

will leave the route clear or that drifting mines will not be encountered'.<sup>633</sup>

Whitehall's harsh but ultimately pragmatic attitude to all subsequent attacks was set with this response: we can guarantee nothing in terms of safety for the Red Cross.

Although this argument may have been accepted by Geneva in the case of the *Padua*, as time went on and the attacks increased across more areas of Europe, the ICRC became more frustrated with the lack of protection accorded to its vehicles and installations. For the dogmatic followers of the ICRC's principles, this was a justified complaint, as the ships, trucks and hospitals bearing the Red Cross emblem were, under the terms of the Geneva Convention, technically sacrosanct on the battlefield.<sup>634</sup> The misplacement of this trust in the Convention, in spite of the realities of war, was proven time and again during the spring of 1944 when there were numerous attacks by Allied aircraft on clearly marked Red Cross ships and installations in the Netherlands, Albania, Romania and the Golfe du Lion. The perpetrators' attitude to the attacks is best summarized in the ICRC's post-war report, which concluded that, overall, protests about these and other violations by either the Axis or Allies during this intensifying period of bombing 'elicited no reply' or, 'if they were acknowledged, the answer was usually either confined to denying the alleged facts, or sometimes asserting that the emblem was inadequately displayed, or entirely lacking'.<sup>635</sup>

There were exceptions, such as the case of the attack on the *Chasseral*, a clearly-marked vessel that was strafed in late April by British fighters, leaving

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<sup>633</sup> Ibid. – Frazer to Brown, 3 November 1943; Brown to Frazer, 5 November 1943.

<sup>634</sup> *Geneva Convention 1929*, Article 24.

<sup>635</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.211.



the Admiralty 'at a loss in these circumstances to explain the attack'.<sup>636</sup> In general, however, there was a degree of British evasion of responsibility. As the attacks increased, Whitehall's policy in dealing with the ICRC's protests hardened into the response that the British would only investigate the issue if they received an official complaint via the Protecting Power.<sup>637</sup> This reply was in marked contrast to the British reaction to the sinking of the *Stureborg* by Italian bombers in 1942, which was characterised by the Foreign Office urging the ICRC to investigate the incident and to emphasise in public the fault of the Italians.<sup>638</sup>

As damaging as each incident was physically to the Red Cross and its delegates, there was a further price to be paid in terms of the cumulative impact of the attacks on British-ICRC relations. The political fallout from the incidents was not truly felt until one of the most serious pre D-Day attacks occurred on 6 April 1944 when the parcel ship *Embla* was bombed by British planes off Port Vendres in the Golfe du Lion, resulting in the loss of 25 tonnes of goods through fire and water damage. The ICRC's response followed the line taken in previous attacks in the form of a written complaint to Whitehall. This time, however, the Committee took its protest one step further by suggesting to the British that shipping in that region – the crucial parcel route upon which many British POWs relied – would be suspended in protest.<sup>639</sup>

Although the ICRC's Report is understandably guarded, it is hard to believe that the evasive attitude of the British regarding the increasingly regular attacks on Red Cross installations did not influence the Committee's decision

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<sup>636</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/941 – Admiralty to Air Ministry, 30 April 1944.

<sup>637</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.690.

<sup>638</sup> See Ch.2, p.147.

<sup>639</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/941 – Berne to FO, 12 April 1944.

to shock Whitehall into paying attention. The ICRC succeeded in its objective, albeit with the drawback that the harshness of the threat made the Committee seem callous. The British response to the ICRC's ultimatum was, understandably, one of outrage and astonishment. Such extreme measures were, after all, far from typical of the ICRC. Even the BRC, no doubt mindful of the public criticism it received in 1940 when the Marseilles route collapsed, was indignant at the ICRC's threat to engender a similar situation. Thus, with the approval of the Ministry for Transport and the Admiralty, the BRC drafted an 'emphatic protest' to Geneva questioning the Committee's wisdom in suspending parcel delivery operations and casting doubt upon the veracity of its story of the attack.<sup>640</sup>

The already volatile situation worsened when confirmation was received that the attack had indeed been perpetrated by Bristol Beaufighters, leading the Admiralty to go on the offensive and blame the ICRC. Its claim was that 'no notification of sailing of *Embla* was received by C in C Mediterranean' and, furthermore 'during March and early April the majority of movements of Red Cross ships sighted south bound from Marseilles were not received by C in C Mediterranean'.<sup>641</sup> This was a reactive statement by the Admiralty which, behind closed doors, was very unsure of its posture towards the ICRC. This is evidenced by the fact that in the wake of the ICRC's threat the Admiralty felt the need to cable the British embassy in Lisbon requesting clear instructions of the notification procedure for ships along the Lisbon-Marseilles route – a procedure the Admiralty should already have been aware of.<sup>642</sup>

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<sup>640</sup> Ibid. – Draft Response from BRC to ICRC, 14 April 1944.

<sup>641</sup> Ibid. – C in C Mediterranean to Admiralty, 17 April 1944; Admiralty Minute, 13 April 1944.

<sup>642</sup> Ibid. – Lisbon to C in C Mediterranean, 19 April 1944.

Furthermore, when pressed by the ICRC to present evidence of the latter's numerous errors in reporting, the Admiralty compiled a weak report that indicated there were only two infractions other than the *Embla*, one being the comparatively minor *Lobito* incident.<sup>643</sup> On the matter of the *Embla* itself the Admiralty continued to insist that the ICRC never reported the vessel's sailing, an allegation that was refuted by the ICRC's Colonel Iselin in Lisbon. In the midst of this finger-pointing on 19 April the ICRC backed down from its threat to suspend sailing.<sup>644</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain what prompted this decision but one suspects it was an effort to defuse the tension rather than an admission of guilt by the Committee. This, however, was not the end of the story. After being repaired at Port Vendres and setting sail on 20 April the *Embla* was subjected to a second attack by British planes, this time resulting in her sinking with the loss of all cargo and the ICRC's convoy agent, Marcel Reutter.<sup>645</sup>

Although the Admiralty once again emphasised lack of reporting as the cause, the fact that the *Embla* was this time attacked by multiple planes, in clear daylight and with Red Cross markings on the hull and deck, indicated that British trigger-happiness was as much, if not more, to blame than any negligence in reporting on the part of Geneva.<sup>646</sup> Furthermore, unlike the initial attack, the British promptly apologised suggesting that someone in

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<sup>643</sup> Ch.2, p.169-170.

<sup>644</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/941 – Berne to FO, 9 May 1944; Admiralty to FO, 21 May 1944; Geneva to FO, 19 April 1944; Berne to FO, 12 May 1944.

<sup>645</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.72; TNA:PRO FO 916/941 – Berne to FO, 20 April 1944.

<sup>646</sup> From the British investigation it was concluded that the ICRC had reported the *Embla*'s sailing route, albeit to the wrong British authorities. This was denied by the ICRC's delegate in Lisbon, Colonel Iselin. The British also alleged that the markings on vessels of this size were too small to be identified from the air. Even so, the attack did occur in broad daylight, owing the suspension by the Germans of night time shipping around Marseilles in early April 1944 – TNA:PRO FO 916/941 – PWD to ICRC, 25 May 1944; *BRC Report*, vol.1, p.373; *ICRC Report*, vol.139.

Whitehall was mindful of the seriousness of the incident or at the very least sympathetic to the fact that the ICRC's notification systems in Marseilles and Toulon were slow and often prone to break downs. This was particularly the case where ships were held up and their shipping schedule disrupted, which, owing to the first attack, the *Embla's* certainly was.<sup>647</sup>

The apologetic British reaction may also have been prompted by other factors, such as the aforementioned attack by British fighters on the *Chasseral* on 26 April. British guilt in both attacks, therefore, influenced Whitehall's decision to handle the sinking of the *Embla* in a more conciliatory manner than the initial attack. Although guilt was a factor the swift British apology was, however, primarily designed to calm the ICRC as it was recognised by the Foreign Office that 'we have more to lose than the Axis by the curtailment of shipping'.<sup>648</sup> Unfortunately, no amount of apology could undo what happened only a matter of days after the *Embla's* sinking.

On 6 May yet another Red Cross ship, the *Christina*, was attacked whilst at anchorage in the port of Sete, not far from the site of the *Embla* attack. Once again British pilots were identified as the culprits and once again the ICRC announced that it was suspending all shipping to Marseilles until such time as the safety of its vessels could be guaranteed. Ostensibly this reaction was prompted by the British suggestion that, in the wake of the *Christina* and *Embla* attacks, a new procedure for reporting should be introduced using wireless transmission from the vessels rather than pre-designated route planning. The ICRC believed that the Germans – whose acquiescence was required for any such change in ICRC shipping procedure – would take time

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<sup>647</sup> For details of notification problems in 1944 see *ICRC Report*, vol.3, pp.150-151, 136-137; TNA:PRO FO 916/941 – Berne to FO, 9 May 1944.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid. – Washington to FO, 11 May 1944.

responding to the new proposal. Accordingly, the ICRC decided that while deliberations were made, the best course of action would be to suspend shipping until the new measures could be agreed upon.<sup>649</sup>

The argument for a suspension on this basis was sound and reasonable. As the Committee suspected, debate over the specifics of the new wireless setup was laborious and an agreement by both belligerents not reached until August 1944.<sup>650</sup> The Committee's ban on shipping, however, did not last that long and was lifted on 2 June.<sup>651</sup> The hesitancy on the part of the ICRC fully to commit to retaliatory measures indicates that its real intention in threatening to suspend traffic was both to gain leverage in further negotiations with the British over shipping conditions and to vent frustration at the lack of respect given to the Red Cross emblem. The fact that, by this time, Geneva had a stockpile of up to ten weeks worth of parcels supports the notion that the ICRC may have felt comfortable enough, in terms of its supply lines, to cut the shipping service for more long-term gain.<sup>652</sup>

Nothing, however, was gained from the ICRC's protest. Indeed, the poor timing of the ban – barely a week before D-Day – made the Committee's actions appear particularly unreasonable in British eyes. Although the brief shipping ban had no real effect on parcel delivery, the audacity of Geneva's threat was yet another indication to Whitehall of the Committee's increasingly maverick nature. The BRC was equally annoyed by the ICRC's 'unhelpful attitude'<sup>653</sup> on shipping. This perhaps was what led the BRC representative in

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<sup>649</sup> Ibid. – FO to Berne, 18 May 1944; Berne to FO 31 May 1944.

<sup>650</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.152.

<sup>651</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/942 – Lisbon to FO, 2 June 1944.

<sup>652</sup> The BRC also had ten weeks worth of parcels in British storehouses at this time – *BRC Report*, vol.1, p.272.

<sup>653</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/942 – BRC Memo, 14 June 1944.

Washington to leak information to the War Office concerning the ICRC's plans to publish the many protests lodged in Geneva over attacks on Red Cross ships.<sup>654</sup> For its part the Admiralty expressed concern that the ICRC was recklessly handling a situation that ultimately affected British POWs.<sup>655</sup> As it turned out, the impact of the Committee's brief suspension of the Marseilles route was minimal compared to the impact of Allied military action on ICRC operations in that region.

The real problem for the Marseilles route came on 14 June when, owing to the successful bombardment of rail lines in southern France by the Allies, the Committee announced that all rail services from Marseilles to its storehouses in Geneva had to be stopped. There is no evidence to suggest that this announcement was a leverage-seeking protest similar to that launched over the *Christina* attacks. There had been a lack of rail wagons throughout southern France since mid 1943 when Allied air raids in northern Italy knocked out several rail yards which the ICRC relied on for rolling stock.<sup>656</sup> The escalation of the air raids in southern France during early June, therefore, exacerbated what was already an unstable situation. Compounding this issue was the fact that, six days after the announcement of the rail system collapse, all shipping to Marseilles was also suspended on account of increased military activity. This left the Committee's storehouses in that city packed full of increasingly valuable parcels which were unable to be transported to the camps by train or by sea to a more suitable transshipment

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<sup>654</sup> Ibid. – WO to ADM, 6 June 1944.

<sup>655</sup> Ibid. – ADM to C in C Mediterranean, 2 June 1944.

<sup>656</sup> The rail yards in question were at Milan, Bologna, Verona and Rome. By the time Italy capitulated in September 1943, rail cars were so scarce in that country that the ICRC were denied the use of any Italian rolling stock – *ICRC Report*, vol.2, pp.171-172.

location.<sup>657</sup> The ICRC's prior threat of suspending the Marseilles route had been brought to fruition, albeit in a manner that was now beyond its control.

The British could exercise some measure of control over the parcel situation, yet chose not to. With the war initiative firmly in the Allied camp and Operation Dragoon,<sup>658</sup> the planned landing of Allied troops in southern France, set for 15 August, it was clear that Marseilles, one of the targets for liberation in Dragoon, would soon become a battleground. Despite the seriousness and outrage with which the British responded to the ICRC's threat to shut down Marseilles three months before, no one in Whitehall appears seriously to have considered how Dragoon would affect the delivery of parcels to British POWs.

<sup>659</sup> This was owed as much to a lack of consideration by Whitehall as it was to the delayed planning of Dragoon, the purposes and execution of which was argued over by the British and the Americans until the final acceptance of the plan in June 1944.<sup>660</sup> In the midst of these disagreements the problem of POW welfare remained one of minimal importance to the military planners even when solutions were being clearly offered to them.

When, for example, the British received a request on 1 July from the ICRC to establish an alternative shipping route via the Baltic, Whitehall sat on the proposal for a full month before finally replying on 30 July that the idea would only be 'sympathetically examined'.<sup>661</sup> In the meantime, the first two ships considered for the new route, the Swedish freighters *Mangalore* and

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<sup>657</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/943 – Geneva to FO, 14 June 1944; TNA:PRO FO 916/932 – FO to Geneva, 20 June 1944.

<sup>658</sup> Originally named Operation Anvil.

<sup>659</sup> A greater emphasis was placed in the planning on developing new supply routes for the French Resistance via Marseille – TNA:PRO WO 204/553, 554, 555.

<sup>660</sup> E.F. Ellis, *Victory in the Second World War*, 2 vols. (London, 1962), vol.2, pp.434-35.

<sup>661</sup> The initial proposal specified the granting of passage for only two Swedish owned vessels the *Mangalore* and the *Travancore* – TNA:PRO FO 916/943 – Geneva to FO, 1 July 1944; FO to Berne, 30 July 1944.

*Travancore*, waited fully-laden at Barcelona for notification of their as yet undetermined destination. In the weeks prior to its response Whitehall, despite knowing full well that Dragoon would further cripple the already struggling Marseilles route, continued to speak in hopeful terms of the 'pending resumption [of] service to Marseilles' and the need to make 'maximum use [of] rail service as and when it might be intermittently open for traffic'.<sup>662</sup> These comments were made internally and as such there is no reason to believe that they were an element of the pre-invasion deception plan, Operation Ferdinand.<sup>663</sup> The assumptions were the product of negligence, not subterfuge.

In defence of the British it should be noted that the ICRC reported to the Foreign Office on 24 June that the Marseilles route would be temporarily restored, which indeed it was the next day.<sup>664</sup> What must be considered, however, is that, at this point, the ICRC had no reason to think that this resumption would not become at least semi-permanent. The British, on the other hand, knew of the imminent Allied military operations in southern France and yet it was they, not Geneva, who continued to place hope in a swift and stable restoration of the Marseilles route.

British faith in Marseilles came from the view that Dragoon, despite being initially disruptive, would eventually help the Allies to take control of the city and re-activate it as a viable port.<sup>665</sup> Bearing in mind the importance of

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<sup>662</sup> Ibid. – FO to Geneva, 4 July 1944; FO to Geneva, 16 July 1944; Ministry of War Transport to PWD, 26 July 1944.

<sup>663</sup> The objective of this plan was to convince the Germans that the landing would be at Genoa. The final draft of the plan was not approved until 28 July – Thaddeus Holt, *The Deceivers: Allied Military Deception in the Second World War* (New York, 2004), pp.615-618.

<sup>664</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/942 – Geneva to FO, 24 June 1944; *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.159.

<sup>665</sup> The primary target was Toulon, the secondary was Marseilles – TNA:PRO WO 204/554 – AFHQ To C in C Mediterranean, 7 July 1944.



Marseilles to the welfare of POWs, this was a weighty and reckless assumption for Whitehall to make. It also turned out to be an erroneous one. Although the city was captured, the docks were so badly damaged in the fighting that, when a new Mediterranean route was finally established in September, ships were diverted to nearby Toulon which initially had none of the warehousing and transshipment facilities needed by the ICRC. The establishment of parcel delivery from Toulon was, therefore, sluggish at a time when it needed to be anything but.<sup>666</sup>

The British handling of the Marseilles problem indicates that despite the concerns raised in Whitehall over the ICRC's June threats, few in the POW administrations seriously considered that humanitarian operations – including those that benefited British POWs – would need to be moved as far from active military zones as possible. In conceiving the idea of a new northern route both the ICRC and the American Red Cross (ARC), its supporters in the initiative, showed that they at least appreciated this necessity. Although heavily mined, the Baltic was a far less active theatre than southern France. Yet, when the idea was presented to the British prior to Dragoon, they prevaricated.

As much as this was a manifestation of Whitehall's reluctance to entertain the ICRC's plans, the British were also acting in accordance to the long-held formula of "victory before relief". Following this doctrine it was easier to believe in the success of Dragoon, and the expectation that the Allies' subsequent northward advance would not disrupt the Marseilles line, than it was to approve a new route that would, inevitably, open up fresh disputes over navicerts and safe conducts. MEW, in particular, had cause to reject anything that might further complicate its already laboured dealings with the

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<sup>666</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.234.

ICRC. Since April the Ministry had been involved in intense negotiations with the Committee over both the latter's proposal to exempt all further civilian relief from the Swiss national import quota, and proposals for a general loosening of the blockade in order to provide relief for civilian populations and concentration camp internees. These negotiations raised a flurry of complications in which MEW's most prevalent condition – adequate supervision – was the key point of discussion.<sup>667</sup>

MEW's goal, especially at such a crucial time for the Allied military effort, was to prohibit anything that might give the Germans an advantage and so prolong the war. The Admiralty also shared this concern, rejecting the Baltic route idea on the grounds that Stettin, the proposed destination port, was in German hands. It was instead suggested, albeit reluctantly, that Gothenburg be used as a terminal port and that the ICRC use a ferry from that point onward.<sup>668</sup> Walter Roberts similarly doubted the probability of a safe conduct being granted for Baltic waters and so advised that more time would be needed to consider the military situation before the British could come to a decision.<sup>669</sup>

Although these arguments for refusing the Baltic route seem credible, Whitehall also had an underlying reason that was not revealed to the ICRC. The British were not perturbed because their POWs were 'not in immediate jeopardy', owing to the fact that the BRC 'had accumulated substantial reserves at Geneva'.<sup>670</sup> American POWs, however, were in desperate need of a

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<sup>667</sup> The Swiss quota proposal was eventually approved by the British on 19 December – *JRC Report*, pp.22-24. The proposal for civilian relief was given approval in early June, albeit with conditions that were subject to revision over the course of 1944. For a summary of these negotiations see generally TNA:PRO FO 837/1217, especially MEW Memo, 18 September 1944.

<sup>668</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/943 – ADM to Ministry of War Transport, 20 July 1944.

<sup>669</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/943 – FO to Washington, 21 July 1944.

<sup>670</sup> *Ibid.* – Minutes of War Office Meeting, 29 July 1944.

new shipping route because supplies held in Geneva for their benefit were only expected to last until 15 August.<sup>671</sup> Evidently, this was not Whitehall's concern and for the Ministry of War Transport, the Admiralty and MEW, the establishment of a new route that would initially benefit only the Americans was simply too much of a headache at that stage of the war. The Baltic route was rejected simply because it would be too much effort for too little British gain.

Unsurprisingly, both Washington and the ARC enthusiastically supported the ICRC's proposals for the Baltic route. The State Department even went so far as to adopt the ICRC's often-used tactic of appealing to British self-interest by indicating to the Foreign Office that a quarter of the supplies onboard the *Mangalore* and the *Travancore* were destined for British POWs.<sup>672</sup> The substance of this suggestion was equally important as its source. The very fact that Washington was getting involved in the situation was enough to help convince the British to reconsider the ICRC's plan and on 5 August Whitehall granted safe conducts for the two ships and all other Red Cross vessels transshipping goods to Gothenburg. This was provided, of course, that ICRC supervision comparable to that which had previously existed in Marseilles could be guaranteed.<sup>673</sup>

The ICRC's reaction to Whitehall's agreement was typical of the strained state of British-ICRC relations. Rather than accept what it had been granted, the ICRC protested against the stringency of MEW's new conditions, arguing that the British proposals were not only impractical but also time-consuming. Accordingly, the Committee pushed for permission for direct transshipment to

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<sup>671</sup> *BRC Report*, vol.1, p.387.

<sup>672</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/943 – US Embassy to FO, 18 July 1944.

<sup>673</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/944 – FO to Berne, 5 August 1944; FO to Geneva, 10 August 1944.

German ports via Swedish commercial vessels. In theory this alternative was dangerous for the Committee in that it placed relief supplies on unmarked and, therefore, unprotected vessels.<sup>674</sup> The fact that the ICRC put forward this proposal regardless of the danger, gives some indication of the level of cynicism that the attacks on the Marseilles route had engendered. Owing to this acceptance by Geneva that the Red Cross emblem was no guarantee of safety, as well as fears of the possibility of another 1940-type collapse of the parcel routes, the ICRC deemed its proposal for unmarked vessels in the Baltic to be a risk worth taking.

Another reason why the ICRC was so determined to resist British insistence on controls was that, unlike previous shipping disputes, the issue of the Baltic route was of deep concern for the Americans. The Committee knew it had the backing of Washington and so pushed for a speedier alternative, even toying with the idea of the parcels being shipped in German commercial freighters under a guarantee of non-interference from Berlin. These, and other untenable schemes, were put forward by the ICRC, Washington and the Swedish government for several crucial weeks until finally, in late October, Stockholm agreed to the use of Swedish commercial shipping, flying under neutral colours. The port of final destination was agreed – grudgingly by the British – as Lubeck.<sup>675</sup> These conditions were the exact opposite of those the British had laid out as requirements for the Baltic route in early August.

Such a reversal of policy on the part of the British did not mean, however, that the establishment of the Baltic route was a victory for the ICRC. More than anything, Whitehall's agreement to ICRC shipping in the Baltic stands as an example of how influential the wishes of Washington could be and,

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<sup>674</sup> Ibid. – FO to Washington, 22 August 1944; *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.163.

<sup>675</sup> *BRC Report*, vol.1, p.394.

moreover, how those wishes affected British-ICRC relations during the final stages of the war. The fact that in the wake of Washington's involvement the British Chiefs of Staff met specifically to discuss the ICRC's proposal in early August indicates how politically weighty the issue of the Baltic route was. Furthermore, it is clear from the minutes of this meeting that the British realised that, owing to the American viewpoint, there could be 'very high level political repercussions'<sup>676</sup> should they refuse the proposal. It was a fear of these repercussions, rather than agreement with the ICRC, that led to the British approving the Baltic route.

Behind this agreement, however, the British were still pursuing an "us and them" POW policy with their American allies. In August, under pressure from Washington, the British authorised the release of some of their own parcels in Geneva for distribution to the deprived American POWs.<sup>677</sup> Though ostensibly a noble gesture, this came with the proviso 'that supplies for United States prisoners do not receive preferential treatment as compared with those for British Commonwealth prisoners'.<sup>678</sup> In one instance a violation of this condition was used by the British as a stick with which to beat the ICRC. In late October Whitehall complained to Washington that Colonel Iselin, the Committee's delegate in Lisbon, was favouring American interests by permitting the *Henry Dunant* and the *Caritas II*, both of which were loaded with ARC parcels, to leave port ahead of ships laden with BRC parcels.

Whitehall was supported by the BRC, which, although defensive of Iselin's role, agreed that a degree of blame for the order lay with the Committee's

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<sup>676</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/344 – Minutes of British Chiefs of Staff Meeting, 3 August 1944.

<sup>677</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/944 – FO to Washington, 21 August 1944.

<sup>678</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/945 – FO to Washington, 10 October 1944.

leadership.<sup>679</sup> This British criticism took no account of the fact that, despite the release of some British parcels to American prisoners, the latter were still comparatively lacking in relief supplies and that if Geneva was guilty of anything it was only of an attempt to redress this imbalance.

There is a striking similarity in this situation to that which existed regarding French and British POWs in 1940. This indicates that, despite everything that had occurred in the field of parcel delivery over the intervening four years, the British were still unduly putting the interests of their own POWs far ahead of their allies and still attempting to push the ICRC's activities in favour of British interests. In terms of comprehending the ICRC's mandate to supply relief to all POWs of all nationalities, the British were still at best detached and, at worst, ignorant and selfish. This unreasonable attitude persisted even after the German declaration of 20 October that no more stockpiles of parcels would be allowed to accumulate in POW camps. This measure was taken by the Germans on the assertion that such stockpiles of food would be targeted for theft by partisan groups.<sup>680</sup>

In the wake of Berlin's declaration, the US State Department sent a note to its embassy in London ordering them to persuade the British to be more agreeable about parcel delivery routes. This indicates that the Americans, at least, both comprehended the significance of the prohibition of stockpiling and, in general, understood that the question of POW relief was going to be one of 'imperative urgency'<sup>681</sup> in the context of the liberation of Europe. Bearing in mind the liberation of Europe had begun three months beforehand,

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<sup>679</sup> The BRC wished to keep on good terms with Iselin and so requested the Foreign Office tone down mention of him in its protest – TNA:PRO FO 916/946 – FO to Washington, 26 October 1944; BRC to FO, 18 October 1944.

<sup>680</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/821 – Berne to FO, 20 October 1944.

<sup>681</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/945 – State Department to US Embassy, 30 September 1944.

this realisation seems to be a bit tardy. In considering this, as well as the British attitude to their POWs and the negotiations over the Baltic parcel route, a question presents itself: Did the Allies actually consider the welfare of their POWs in the planning for D-Day? And if not, how did the ICRC deal with this situation?

### **D-DAY PREPARATIONS**

Historians have generally been scathing of the Allies' efforts to care for their POWs during the final stages of the European conflict. Arie Kochavi has deemed the policy of the Western Allies to be based on little more than the 'calculated risk' they took with their POWs throughout the war, whilst a more disparaging opinion, expressed by Nichol and Rennell, is that the prisoners were quite simply 'abandoned to their fate' in the months following the D-Day landings.<sup>682</sup> Although this latter sentiment generally rings true, the implication of callous desertion is to some extent misleading and requires clarification. In addressing this issue my aim is not to offer yet another assessment of this well-documented topic, but to present a context in which to understand how the efforts of the Allies on behalf of their POWs during the war's final months related to those of the ICRC.

Although they were undoubtedly low on the Allied leaderships' priority list the POWs were not arbitrarily 'abandoned'. Throughout the invasion of Europe the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), Washington and various ministries in Whitehall worked on schemes to both safeguard and supply Allied POWs. Many of these schemes were hastily devised. However,

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<sup>682</sup> Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, p.202; Nichol and Rennell, *Last Escape*, ch.2. See Rolf 'Blind Bureaucracy' for a generally negative assessment of British policy towards POWs in the Second World War. See Gilbert, *POW*, ch.14 for an analysis of the Allied leadership's confusing POW liberation policy in Italy in 1943.

considerations of POW welfare had in fact been discussed at high levels in Whitehall as early as 1942, when a plan was put forward proposing the dropping of arms into POW camps during the invasion for the purpose of enabling the prisoners to both protect themselves from German reprisals and 'control "chaos" in the liberated territories'.<sup>683</sup>

Although it was rejected at that time by the DPW as impractical on many levels, the plan was not totally forgotten in Whitehall, and the Air Ministry proposed a similar scheme in January 1944.<sup>684</sup> Notably, this renewed suggestion was not seriously considered by Whitehall's POW administration until after D-Day, when Lieutenant-Colonel Harry Phillimore of the DPW concluded that the proposal might now be worth pursuing. Having considered Phillimore's plans in July, SHAEF responded with tentative approval.<sup>685</sup> Yet despite receiving confirmation for the proposal from the highest Allied authority on the continent it was not until March 1945 that a bastardised version of Phillimore's plan was finally realised in the creation of the Special Allied Airborne Reconnaissance Force (SAARF).

An initiative of Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the American OSS, SAARF only began training in early March and thus had completed only one mission, Operation Violet, before the armistice was signed. Deemed a success, the mission resulted in the securing of the prisoners, the 'demoralising' of the German guards and, most importantly, the prevention of the prisoners falling into the hands of their supposed "allies" in the Red Army.

<sup>686</sup> This was a far cry from the initial proposal for POW protection voiced in

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<sup>683</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/351 – DPW Memo, 19 June 1942.

<sup>684</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/352 – AIR to Washington, 27 January 1944.

<sup>685</sup> Nichol and Rennell, *Last Escape*, p.45.

<sup>686</sup> TNA:PRO WO 219/2423 – Report on Operation Violet, 13 May 1945.



1942. After many months of deliberation SAARF was only active from the final weeks of the war until 1 July 1945, when the organisation was quietly disbanded.<sup>687</sup>

The story of SAARF is a telling example of how the Allies' plans for safeguarding their POWs were conducted in 1944-45 – in a laborious, overly bureaucratic and generally ineffective fashion. This was despite, as Churchill remarked to Roosevelt in March 1945, having supposedly 'long foreseen the danger to these prisoners arising either in consequence of chaotic conditions resulting from a German collapse or alternatively out of a deliberate threat by Hitler and his associates to murder some or all of the prisoners'.<sup>688</sup> These scenarios may have been envisaged and even remarked on in Whitehall but few seriously considered how much the complete breakdown of the Third Reich would impact on the well-being of POWs. Even fewer of those who *did* realise took action. For all the talk the actual details of any plans were left in the ether.

The main reason for this negligence was that, much like their attitude during the Baltic route negotiations, the British were more inclined to stick to the status quo rather than risk a shake-up of their POW management structure. A prime example of this policy in practice was the decision made by the DPW on 21 January 1944 that, rather than attempt the long-debated arms drop plan, the prisoners would instead be ordered to "stand fast" and patiently await their liberation.<sup>689</sup> The fact that this order was given and continued to be issued even after it had become untenable over the winter of 1944-45 is further evidence of Whitehall's stubbornness. As had occurred throughout the

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<sup>687</sup> Nichol and Rennell, *Last Escape*, pp.179-180.

<sup>688</sup> *Churchill and Roosevelt*, 22 March 1945, vol.3, C-920, p.580.

<sup>689</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/344 – Minutes of DPW Meeting, 21 January 1944.

war, plans for POW welfare were put forward. Failure to understand both how best to implement those plans and recognise which ones would be truly effective, however, engendered a scenario in which nothing could be practically executed. The failure in 1944 was not a lack of consideration. It was simply a recurrence of the ineptitude shown throughout the war by the British in co-ordinating humanitarian and military tasks.

The outlook of their allies in Washington was not the same. In general, the American leaders displayed a degree of foresight and consideration on this issue that their counterparts in Whitehall did not. Moreover, it was a consideration that proposed greater involvement of the Red Cross than had been welcomed by the British throughout the war. In March 1944 the Supreme Commander of the Allied invasion force, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, raised the idea of the ARC accompanying Allied forces into the zones of occupation for the purpose of providing relief for civilians and liberated POWs.<sup>690</sup> The US State Department had similarly recommended that the blockading authorities alter their 'unnecessarily stringent' conditions allowing Red Cross POW parcel ships along the Marseilles line so that they could also carry supplies for invalids, children and pregnant women. Even more surprising, the State Department proposed that these supplies should be distributed by the ICRC using its existing supervision and delivery infrastructure.<sup>691</sup>

This dissimilarity in attitude towards the ICRC was the product of differing experience. Unlike their British allies the Americans had not endured the difficulties of relief negotiations with the ICRC in Greece and southern France and thus they did not have Whitehall's long held reservations over Geneva's

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<sup>690</sup> TNA:PRO WO 219/33 – SHAEF to WO, 25 March 1944.

<sup>691</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1217 – US State Department to FO, 27 May 1944.

intentions. Once presented with the American plan the Foreign Office was quick to voice these reservations, conceding to Washington that whilst the proposal 'would appear to dispose from the operational point of view of the difficulties connected with safe conduct and the use of a European port, those involved in internal transport and distribution would remain to be solved'.<sup>692</sup> The British, as always, did not trust the ICRC's capabilities to supervise and distribute the supplies.

It seems likely that this mistrust laid the foundations for a modified version of Eisenhower's suggestion in which the ARC and the BRC alone would be permitted to conduct relief operations in areas near to the front. Even this pre-planning, however, was plagued by red tape. Despite being conceived in the spring the proposal was only approved on 4 July and then only after Eisenhower had reminded the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCOC) that his three-month old idea had yet to be decided on.<sup>693</sup>

This lack of enthusiasm for the ICRC's, and anyone else's, attempts to co-ordinate relief during the invasion was indicative of the Allied leadership's fear that in embracing humanitarian schemes the goal of a swift victory would be jeopardised. This attitude was best encapsulated by Churchill when discussing relief plans with Roosevelt in April 1944. He observed that 'the opening of further channels of importation into Europe at the present moment would, in our view, be wholly incompatible with the naval and military situation which is developing'. Accordingly, both Churchill and Roosevelt agreed that with regard to the blockade 'nothing should be done that will interfere with or hamper forthcoming operations'.<sup>694</sup>

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<sup>692</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1217 – FO to Washington, 3 June 1944.

<sup>693</sup> TNA:PRO CAB 122/451 – SHAEF to CCOS, 28 June 1944; CCOS to SHAEF, 4 July 1944.

<sup>694</sup> *Churchill and Roosevelt*, vol.3, 8 April 1944, C-641, R-519, pp.85-86.

This opinion formed the root of the problem in relations between the ICRC and the British during the invasion of Europe. With terrestrial military operations underway the British mantra of "victory before relief" was modified into an Anglo-American policy in which humanitarian operations – primarily for civilians, though to a lesser extent, also for POWs – were to be reduced or delayed until the fighting came to an end. Although an argument can be made to justify the Allies' policy, particularly if one considers the attacks on the *Embla* and the *Christina*, there was an important difference in the ICRC's perspective of the conflict that made its opinion on relief strategy, particularly regarding POWs, far more valid.

Unlike Washington and Whitehall, the ICRC had delegates on the ground who continually observed the changes in mood in the German administration and the conditions in POW camps. This was a crucial factor in Geneva's ability to interpret the threat to the prisoners in 1944-45. Whereas in the war's middle years the ICRC would gather information, report it to the belligerents and await a response, the rapid changes in conditions in post D-Day Europe led the Committee to gather and analyse information in a more expeditious, independent and adaptive manner. This ability gave the ICRC an overview of the changing situation on the ground that the belligerents' respective POW departments, coloured in their opinions by military concerns as they were, did not have. What the ICRC's reports indicated was that by late 1943 – a time when the Allied governments were just emerging from their state of inertia regarding POW safety<sup>695</sup> – incidents of POW mistreatment were escalating and, owing to military circumstances, taking on new and perilous guises.

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<sup>695</sup> Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, p.171.

One of the more common phenomena was observed in a report compiled in November by a delegate inspecting the newly relocated Dulag Luft at Frankfurt am Main. Food and clothing supplies were substantial and material conditions at the new site comfortable. However, the inspector concluded that the 'only point to which this report must pay extra special attention' was that the camp had been built so near to the city that it was 'exposed to aerial attack'. The delegate's allegation that this relocation was deliberate was wholly justified, for in March 1944 the Dulag was destroyed by Allied bombing.<sup>696</sup> Similar alarms were raised in April when the ICRC became aware of an OKW order authorising factories in the Rhone Valley to use POWs as operators of anti-aircraft defences. Geneva's protests to Berlin on this issue were met with the flimsy excuse that as German civilians were now being similarly employed, the POWs could not expect preferential treatment.<sup>697</sup>

The callous German attitude to the issue of POW protection was more overtly felt within the camps themselves. In August 1943 captured airmen– dubbed *Terrorfligers* by Goebbels' propaganda – in Dulag Luft were placed in solitary confinement inside windowless cells with the radiators turned up high.<sup>698</sup> In October reports from the ICRC and the Protecting Power suggested that German guards at Stalag Luft III (Sagan) were getting jittery, threatening to shoot without warning any prisoners seen out of their barracks at night.<sup>699</sup> Trigger-happy guards were not a phenomenon of Sagan alone. In February 1944 the ICRC was able to confirm that over the course of 1943, 28 prisoners at Stalag VIIIIB (Lamsdorf) had been shot dead, allegedly whilst trying to

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<sup>696</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/18503 – ICRC Report on Dulag Luft, 15 November 1943; TNA:PRO WO 224/67 – Protecting Power Report on Dulag Luft, 24 April 1944.

<sup>697</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, pp.312-313.

<sup>698</sup> TNA:PRO WO 32/18503 – Berne to FO, 2 August 1943.

<sup>699</sup> TNA:PRO WO 224/63 – WO to FO, 6 October 1943.

escape.<sup>700</sup> This grim escalation of events culminated in the execution of fifty Allied POWs in retaliation for the "Great Escape" from Sagan in late March.

Even though the ICRC was able to procure knowledge of these events in a prompt manner, its capacity to respond was impeded by its own limitations. The Committee's first attempt to limit the damage from air raids was to make a proposal similar to that which had been rejected by the British in 1939, namely the reciprocal marking of camps and, if possible, notification by each belligerent of the location of the camps in occupied Europe and the British Isles. The idea, utopian at best, was that these locations would then be avoided by attacking aircraft. Owing to the change in the military situation by 1943 – the Germans were now the ones under severe attack from the air – Berlin showed obstinacy, determined to make sure that the Allies' air raids would not continue without a cost to their own POWs. This attitude was particularly unfortunate as, unlike shipping and parcel delivery, any scheme to better protect POW camps was one in which the ICRC was solely dependent on the assent of the belligerents.

Owing both to the ICRC's powerlessness in this issue and the belligerents' focus on pursuing the war to the fullest, these protective measures were never introduced and by the end of the war the Committee estimated that up to thirty camps in occupied Europe had been attacked from the air, resulting in the deaths of over one thousand POWs.<sup>701</sup> Even Lubeck, the centre of the ICRC's northern supply operations, was not safe from attacking Allied planes,

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<sup>700</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/871 – WO to FO, 11 February 1944.

<sup>701</sup> 651 of the prisoners were killed before October 1944 – *ICRC Report*, vol.1, pp.313-316; TNA:PRO WO 916/889 – WO Report on POW death from Air Raids, 14 October 1944.

which sunk three ships carrying concentration camp inmates – one of which was marked with a Red Cross – during the final week of the war.<sup>702</sup>

The ICRC's dependency on the belligerents to moderate the nature of air attack, coupled with the lack of co-operation from Berlin, set the tone for future negotiations by the Committee in which humanitarian concerns were dwarfed by military objectives. In such circumstances Geneva was helpless. A measure of how helpless can be seen by the fact that the ICRC was forced to respond to the intensifying air war by returning to the futile *démarche* strategy of the war's earlier years.

Following the POW camp marking proposal, Huber wrote to all belligerent governments on 15 March 1944, lamenting the horrific effects of total war on civilian populations and proposing that some respite from the carnage might be achieved by the establishment of zones within the fighting fronts that would not be subject to either aerial or terrestrial attack. Not only was this notion impractical in the context of total war, but it was also little more than a re-imagination by the traditionalist Huber of a decades old Red Cross idea.

Although during the Second World War the suggestion was primarily a response to the new terrors of aerial warfare, the establishment of such "immunity zones" had been a cherished notion of the ICRC since its founder, Henry Dunant, first proposed in 1870 that certain towns within the field of fighting should be designated as safe havens for women and children. In 1938 the concept was even drafted as an article for inclusion in the Geneva Convention. The outbreak of war in 1939, however, prevented any further

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<sup>702</sup> This attack took place despite the local RAF intelligence officer being informed of the ships' cargo. A post-war investigation into the attacks concluded that the information, initially provided to the British by a representative of the Swedish Red Cross, was not passed on to the pilots – David Stafford, *Endgame 1945: Victory, Retribution, Liberation* (London, 2007), pp.296-303.

discussion of this issue at the Diplomatic Conference planned for 1940.<sup>703</sup> It is highly unlikely this article would have been ratified for, as in the case of the aforementioned request to the belligerents to both mark and reveal the locations of all POW camps, the idea of such “immunity zones” was rejected by the belligerents in 1939.<sup>704</sup>

It is testament to the desperation of the Committee during the war’s final years that the concept was again revived at a time when the Allied military strategy had become focused on aerial warfare as a means of paving the way for a continental invasion. The Germans, grasping any straw to diminish the damage of the bombing campaign, gave a tentatively positive reply to Huber’s appeal. The Americans at least deemed the proposal worthy of a written refusal. The Soviets and the British on the other hand, neglected to reply at all.<sup>705</sup>

A sense of the contempt felt by Whitehall for Huber’s suggestion can be gleaned from the fact that the British decision not to reply was only made in October 1944 – seven months after the appeal had been received. This was also three months after the Foreign Office declared that it saw only the ‘practical difficulty of carrying out the suggestion under conditions of modern warfare’. The Admiralty agreed with this sentiment, adding that such an arrangement would lead to the Germans manipulating the Red Cross for their own military ends.<sup>706</sup> The proposal, therefore, was another failure for Huber’s

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<sup>703</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, pp.693-695.

<sup>704</sup> ICRC:G85/1049/042-043 – Huber to Churchill, 28 March 1944; *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.314. The ICRC was able to establish two modified immunity zones in Jerusalem during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war – François Bugnion, 'The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Development of International Humanitarian Law', *Chicago Journal of International Law*, 5, no.1 (2004) 191-215, *Proquest*, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed 11 October 2007), p.206.

<sup>705</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.699.

<sup>706</sup> TNA:PRO ADM 1/16086 – FO Memo, 4 July 1944; Crutchley to FO, 6 October 1944; ADM Memo, 31 August 1944.



tactic of appealing to the goodness of human nature at a time when military concerns were paramount. Moreover, it served only to re-affirm the old belief in Whitehall that the ICRC was clueless as to the realities of the war in Europe and as such, was an easy target for manipulation by Berlin. As was so often the case, however, Carl Burckhardt saw things differently.

Not content with *démarches* and forwarding reports of Geneva Convention violations to Whitehall, in early 1944, Burckhardt went a step beyond Huber's work and attempted to verify whether German abuse of POWs was systemic. No doubt driven by the fear that if it were true the escalating violence could break down the Geneva Convention, Burckhardt instructed Roland Marti in Berlin to find out just how far the Germans were willing to go in the maltreatment of POWs. Having canvassed his contacts in Berlin Marti reported to Burckhardt that fatal reprisals might soon become official OKW policy. Marti's impressions were that the Germans believed that an impending revolt by Allied POWs was about to occur and so had resolved to 'take special measures' against any suspected prisoners.<sup>707</sup> On the day after Burckhardt conveyed this warning to Clifford Norton, "the fifty" Allied prisoners from Sagan were executed as a reprisal for the "Great Escape".

Without knowledge of Marti's source in Germany, it is difficult to know for certain whether the ICRC's report was a credible warning of the atrocity to come or a coincidence. The former seems likely owing to the fact that, despite Weizsäcker's transfer to the Vatican at the end of 1943, the ICRC still had good contacts with the OKW.<sup>708</sup> As good as these relations were, however, the ICRC was still powerless to ensure the safety of POWs and civilian internees

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<sup>707</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/881 – Berne to FO, 25 March 1944.

<sup>708</sup> Over the course of his appointment to Berlin Marti had maintained close and constant contact with the OKW and concentration camp authorities – Junod, *Warrior Without Weapons*, p.182; Favez, *Holocaust*, p.96.

from acts of violence, be they from Allied aircraft or German guards. As we shall see, this situation was only altered, and even then only slightly, following Burckhardt and Marti's negotiations with the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) in early 1945. Until that time, however, the Committee's focus in terms of POW welfare was limited to the task of making sure that the prisoners would be well supplied over the course of 1944.

The ICRC's preliminary preparations for coping with this task had been good. As early as September 1943 Burckhardt had ordered that medical parcels be stockpiled in Geneva 'to be used in cases of emergency'.<sup>709</sup> With the bombing campaign intensifying and an invasion of Europe imminent, the ICRC also made arrangements with the Germans to stockpile eight weeks worth of parcels at Sagan and in March 1944 an additional stockpile of parcels for POWs in transit was created at the main Frontstalag in western France.<sup>710</sup> The means of maintaining these stockpiles and keeping terrestrial parcel routes active was a more difficult affair.

Under pressure from the advancing Red Army the Germans had by late 1943 significantly decreased the amount of rolling stock available to Geneva for the purposes of transporting supplies by rail. In February 1944 the ICRC's fiery Washington delegate, Alfred Zollinger, decided to look to the Allies for help in this matter; a logical decision given that Allied soldiers were the ultimate beneficiaries of an efficient rail system. Even so, Zollinger's request for 600 rail wagons from the Allies was rejected on the grounds that MEW would have found familiar: the specific use of the wagons for Red Cross purposes could not be guaranteed in Nazi-held territory. This issue remained unresolved until

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<sup>709</sup> ICRC:G85/1048 – Drogheda to Burckhardt, 25 September 1943.

<sup>710</sup> TNA:PRO WO 224/63 – PP Report on Stalag Luft III, 17 July 1944. 5,371 parcels had been stockpiled at Frontstalag 133 by March 1944 – TNA:PRO WO 224/57 – PP Report on Frontstalag 133, 27 March 1944.

D-Day, when Zollinger sent a second, related, appeal to the Allies, this time for the establishment of relief supply depots at certain POW camps. Despite encouraging replies from Berlin, this suggestion was also dropped by the Allies, as it 'presented many administrative difficulties'.<sup>711</sup>

The question of road vehicles for ICRC use was no less impeded. In May the Committee appealed to the Allies for trucks to help the distribution of parcels between Marseilles and Switzerland. This request was supported by the ARC and the US Embassy in Berne – even MEW voiced cautious approval. Despite this support, agreement by all parties on the technical details was difficult to achieve.

The ARC accurately foresaw the manifold levels of bureaucracy that would have to be overcome before American trucks landed on European soil for Red Cross use and so encouraged the Committee to seek trucks from neutral Spain or Switzerland in the interim. Neither Spain nor Switzerland was able to meet this demand and it was not until 20 September that fifty American trucks arrived at Barcelona onboard the *Caritas I*. These, however, were only shipped on the proviso that they would be stored at Barcelona until MEW approved their despatch to Switzerland.<sup>712</sup> It took an additional three months for the heavily laden vehicles to reach the Spanish border, during which time a second consignment of twenty-three trucks arrived at Marseilles to form a shuttle service between there and Toulon. An additional fifty trucks from the Canadian Red Cross arrived at Toulon shortly after. It was not until early 1945, however, that the ICRC received its full quota of trucks, by which time the rail service between Marseilles and Switzerland had been stabilised.<sup>713</sup>

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<sup>711</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.2, pp.171-172; *BRC Report*, vol.1, pp.418-420.

<sup>712</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/944 – Washington to MEW, 21 August 1944.

<sup>713</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, pp.186-88.

These trucks were eventually put to excellent and invaluable use in the shattered countryside of Germany and France, but the fact that it had taken eight months for the ICRC's request to be met gives some indication of the inefficient level of co-operation between Geneva and the Allies during this crucial period.

This lack of liaison resulted in the isolation of the ICRC and, initially, a retreat from the progress it had made since 1942. As much as the Committee had improved its operations during the war's stable middle years, the rapid escalation of the conflict in 1944 still posed considerable difficulties that could only have been overcome with support from the belligerents. Unable to handle the intensification of military operations and denied co-operation from both the Allies and the Axis, the Committee was forced to revert to appeals for leniency from the belligerents at a time when both sides were pursuing the exact opposite course. In this context the ICRC could do little except stockpile parcels, attempt to maintain its delivery routes and continue its camp inspections under increasingly dangerous conditions. In planning relief throughout the invasion of Europe, therefore, the ICRC resigned itself to the fact that it would be, for the most part, on its own.

The view of the Allies was, in much the same way as the ICRC, coloured by prior experiences. Whitehall's persistent concerns over the ICRC's supervisory capabilities and opinion of the Committee as being out of touch with the realities of the military situation led the Allies – with the exception of Washington's swiftly quashed suggestion in March 1944 to co-ordinate with Geneva – practically to omit the ICRC in their preparations for the invasion of Europe. It was not until 28 June that the British even questioned whether the

ICRC had enough delegates in Berlin to cope with the expected influx of POWs.<sup>714</sup>

This act of exclusion was in keeping both with the Allies' mantra of "victory before relief" and the attitude, particularly prevalent in MEW and the POW departments, to abstain from modifying pre-existing structures for relief. Unsurprisingly, it was not until victory became more distant and the threat to POWs more acute in the autumn of 1944, that the British finally decided that closer liaison with the ICRC was necessary. As was so often the case in the instances of humanitarian and military co-ordination this decision was, by this stage of the invasion, long overdue.

## **THE MARCH**

By autumn 1944 a change that greatly worried the Allies had taken place in Berlin's POW administration. On 1 October Hitler, incensed by the Warsaw Uprising and the threat of similar action being taken by POWs, ordered that the administration of all POW camps be handed over to Heinrich Himmler who in turn passed the duty onto the *SS Gruppenführer* Gottlob Berger.<sup>715</sup> As a result of this action the fate of Allied POWs in Germany now rested in the hands of the SS, which had been identified in a report by the Allied Joint Intelligence Committee on 29 July as the German organisation most likely to carry out any last minute reprisals against POWs.<sup>716</sup> Ever mindful of POW safety, Harry Phillimore at the War Office was quick to envisage a doomsday

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<sup>714</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/938 – Berne to FO, 28 June 1944.

<sup>715</sup> Berger later claimed during the Ministries Trial at Nuremberg that he had countermanded several of Hitler's orders to use POWs as hostages and carry out brutal reprisals. He was acquitted of the allegations of crimes against POWs, but was sentenced to twenty-five years for his role in the Final Solution. He was released in 1951 – Nichol and Rennell, *Last Escape*, pp.400-401.

<sup>716</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/894 – Report of Joint Intelligence Committee, 29 July 1944.

scenario for the prisoners in which they might be used either as hostages or, worse yet, simply executed by the Nazis in one final act of vengeance.

This concern had first been raised by Phillimore in August 1944 when he wrote to the Foreign Office asking what effect Himmler's appointment as commander of the German Reserve Army would have on POWs. He feared that the *Reichsführer-SS* might introduce Gestapo-like tactics into the *Wehrmacht* which at the time was still running the POW camps.<sup>717</sup> These concerns were compounded by information received by the DPW in September from recently exchanged British prisoners which indicated that the SS had both threatened and, indeed, committed acts of violence against POWs. Days after Berger's appointment in October the Swiss Federal Political Department confirmed Hitler's motivation for the change of administration, reporting to Clifford Norton that the Germans feared mass breakouts by British POWs for the purposes of forming, together with Allied paratroopers, 'cells of resistance' and they had therefore resolved to take 'enthusiastic measures' of reprisal.<sup>718</sup> Once these reports on SS intentions were received in Whitehall apprehensions intensified and discussions over POW safety, which would eventually culminate in the aforementioned SAARF operation, began.<sup>719</sup>

Understandably, the ICRC was not consulted on the matter of safeguarding the POWs. As the repeated and failed appeals concerning camp marking and immunity zones indicated, the physical protection of POWs from violent reprisals was beyond the Committee's capabilities. The heightening of concern over this issue did, however, prompt Whitehall to consider other problems

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<sup>717</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/871 – WO to FO, 14 August 1944.

<sup>718</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/355 – DPW 'Report on Possibility of Acts of Violence Towards British Prisoners of War by SS Troops and Gestapo', 29 September 1944; Swiss Federal Political Department To Berne, 9 October 1944.

<sup>719</sup> For discussion of the various schemes, including plans to drop weapons and supplies to POWs see Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, pp.187-192.

relating to POW welfare, specifically, the effects the approaching winter would have on parcel supply routes. It was this problem that finally drew the ICRC into the Allies' plans to protect their POWs.

The instigator of the ICRC's involvement was Walter Roberts, who raised the idea with his colleagues during discussions on the proposal to meet representatives of the Protecting Power.<sup>720</sup> Shortly thereafter Harry Livingston, the British Consul in Geneva, contacted Burckhardt requesting a meeting between the ICRC and the British in order to discuss 'the maintenance of the service of supplies to British prisoners of war and internees in Germany'. Notably, Livingston emphasised that this was the only thing the British POW departments wished to discuss with the Committee's representatives.<sup>721</sup>

One suspects Livingston was instructed to emphasise this point so as to discourage the ICRC from once again raising the immunity zones issue. This is evidenced by the fact that the attempts of the ICRC delegate Walter Fulleman to raise the notion of immunity being granted to a central parcel supply depot in Germany was swiftly rebuffed by War Office representatives on three separate occasions during the series of meetings.<sup>722</sup> As always, the British were not interested in the Committee's impractical attempts to protect the POWs. Their only concern was that the ICRC keep the camps regularly supplied with necessities.

The minutes of the first meeting, for which a British delegation comprising War and Foreign Office representatives travelled to Geneva, was more a

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<sup>720</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/899 – Roberts Minute, 28 October 1944.

<sup>721</sup> ICRC:G23/610 – Livingston to Burckhardt, 8 November 1944.

<sup>722</sup> The initial meeting in Geneva was followed by three more meetings in London in December – ICRC:G85/1049 – Minutes of Meeting between ICRC and British government Representatives, 26 November 1944; TNA:PRO WO 193/344 – Minutes of Interdepartmental Meeting with ICRC, 11 December 1944.

question and answer session than an informed discussion. Questions from the British delegation – all of whom represented prisoner of war departments – over why rolling stock was unavailable, whether the Committee had established itself properly yet at Lubeck and what would happen if the rail lines from France into Switzerland were cut, indicate the level of confusion amongst the British over the POW situation. It was perhaps owing to this lack of understanding, as well as a reluctance to tax themselves over POW matters, that the British showed an uncharacteristic willingness to let the ICRC take the lead.

Having had the particulars of the supply problem clarified by the Committee's representatives, the British contribution to the discussion was generally passive. The most notable items they put forward were an agreement in principle to a safe conduct for ICRC ships bound for the German port of Sassnitz and a few proposals regarding POW exchanges. Aside from these small contributions the British confined themselves to simply asking questions and, once satisfied, they drew the meeting to a close, with the DPW's director, General Gepp, praising the Committee for its 'superhuman' efforts on behalf of British POWs.<sup>723</sup>

Such pleasantries set the tone for a second round of meetings in London in December at which British optimism shone through. Whitehall's representatives expressed confidence that the Marseilles route could 'maintain a regular flow of all necessary supplies to the camps', given that repairs had been made to the docking facilities there and new warehouse space had been prepared in Toulon. The War Office even went so far as to predict a return to

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<sup>723</sup> ICRC:G85/1049 - Minutes of Meeting between ICRC and British government Representatives, 26 November 1944.



the 'one parcel, per man, per week' rate of delivery.<sup>724</sup> Although Fulleman stopped short of guaranteeing this wish, he did cautiously agree with the British that there were 'encouraging' signs that the route was running at pre-invasion capacity.

There was less agreement on the question of the Baltic route, which Fulleman indicated was not running at its optimum owing to the disorganisation of warehouse and transport facilities at Lubeck. It was at this point in the meeting that Fulleman ended the pleasantries by proposing the unpopular solution of a parcel depot in central Germany. Unlike other radical ideas proposed by Geneva during the war the central depot concept was one that, although appearing to the British as yet another idealistic whim, was crucial for the ICRC's strategy for POW relief. The ICRC's proposal not only circumvented the German ban on stockpiles *within* the camps, but it also complemented Fulleman's other suggestion that parcels should no longer be distributed by nationality. If priority needed to be given at all, it should be to those prisoners in most immediate need.<sup>725</sup>

Evidence that these two ideas formed the cornerstone of the ICRC's POW relief strategy in 1944 can be seen in the fact that Geneva had raised this issue long before the November and December meetings. On 17 August the Committee proposed to all belligerents that 'should the internal organisation of the Detaining State break down at a time when it is urgently necessary to forward relief consignments', parcels intended for all internee nationalities should be pooled for easier and more equal access.<sup>726</sup> Alfred Zollinger also pressed the issue of a central depot with the Germans over the summer and

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<sup>724</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/947 – WO Memorandum, 23 November 1944.

<sup>725</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/344 – Minutes of Interdepartmental Meeting with ICRC, 12 December 1944.

<sup>726</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.87.

was able to reach an agreement in principle with Berlin on the proposal for a site at Torgau. The BRC and Whitehall, however, were unreceptive.<sup>727</sup>

This attitude was unchanged at the time of the winter meetings and the suggestion was quickly dismissed by the British. Although it was not mentioned outright, the tone of the refusal to this request indicated that, in addition to wishing to avoid the question of immunity for such a depot, the British also feared that such a large store of food in the heart of Germany would be easy pickings for the retreating *Wehrmacht*. The only Briton who voiced any kind of support for Fulleman's schemes, or indeed, proposed any of his own for the benefit of the POWs, was Harry Phillimore, who emphasised the ICRC's need to be flexible in its delivery routes and – in contrast to the optimism of his colleagues – questioned the delegate for details of the Committee's contingency plans should the Marseilles route again be compromised. Fulleman could only reiterate that the other alternative, Lubeck, was inadequate to handle the tonnage being shipped there. It was on this note that Phillimore's colleague at the War Office, W.H. Gardner, abruptly adjourned the meeting.<sup>728</sup>

When talks resumed a day later Fulleman once again raised the supply depot idea, only to have it quashed by Gardner, this time with the support of the BRC's representative, Lt. Colonel Brown. An alternative proposal from the British for smaller depots in each POW work camp (*Wehrkreis*) was put forward but it was thought that this could only be successful if such depots were situated outside 'likely bombing targets'.<sup>729</sup>

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<sup>727</sup> *BRC Report*, vol.1, pp.418-420.

<sup>728</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/344 – Minutes of Interdepartmental Meetings with ICRC, 11 December 1944.

<sup>729</sup> *Ibid.* – Minutes of Interdepartmental Meeting with ICRC, 12 December 1944.

This proposal had first been raised by Gardner during the meeting in Geneva but the specifics of the plan appear not to have been considered by the British during the intervening weeks. For instance, the idea of situating the camp outside likely bombing targets took no account of the increasingly arbitrary nature of the air war and the fact that the British had repeatedly refused to grant immunity to any zone within the occupied territories.<sup>730</sup> It seems, therefore, that the plan was put forward only as a means of reaching a compromise with the ICRC. Actual realisation of the necessity of the depots, central or otherwise, was not widely recognised by Whitehall, which had not raised the issue in interdepartmental meetings prior to the mission to Switzerland and did nothing to follow up its own proposal for *Wehrkreis* depots in the months to come.<sup>731</sup> The concept of parcel depots simply did not interest the British.

The second issue raised by Fulleman, that of parcel distribution, enjoyed greater consideration by the British than the depot idea. However, despite the change in the numbers and composition of the POWs the British line on this issue was no different to what it had been in 1940. At the Geneva meeting in November the raising of the topic of supplies and conditions for non-British POWs by the ICRC delegates was met with near silence from the British representatives.<sup>732</sup> At the December meeting Gardner made British feelings clear when he urged Fulleman to make sure that 'British prisoners of war were not impeded by some arbitrary formula' for delivering parcels. The notion of distributing parcels without regard to nationality, therefore, was still not welcomed by Whitehall.

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<sup>730</sup> ICRC:G85/1049 – Minutes of Meeting between ICRC and British government Representatives, 26 November 1944.

<sup>731</sup> For details of British interdepartmental meetings during 1944 see TNA:PRO WO 193/344; *BRC Report*, vol.1, p.420.

<sup>732</sup> ICRC:G85/1049 - Minutes Of Meeting between ICRC and British government Representatives, 26 November 1944.

Not only was this a clear example of the British refusing to learn the lessons of 1940, but, in terms of British-ICRC relations, it was a damaging hurdle. Whitehall's refusal to give up its option of self-interest – even at the expense of its closest allies from across the Atlantic – obstructed Geneva's goal of establishing a more fluid and flexible form of parcel delivery in 1944. It was not until February 1945 that the ICRC, by this time thoroughly exasperated by Whitehall's reluctance, began the system of pooling parcels, without any authorisation from the British or any other belligerent government.<sup>733</sup>

As with prior consultations between the ICRC and Whitehall throughout the war, the winter meetings followed a predictable and sad pattern. Rather than open the way for new understanding the meetings served only to re-affirm the opposing policies each party held towards humanitarian relief. As always, Whitehall's aim of directing the ICRC's work towards British interests clashed with the broader goals of Geneva. This issue had dogged British-ICRC relations for much of the war and a change in the situation on the ground in Europe over the winter of 1944-45 gave the dispute an added dimension. The change also showed that, in planning for a central parcel depot in Germany and a more liberal parcel distribution policy, the ICRC had shown a crucial, albeit ill-received, degree of foresight.

The change that so disrupted the plans of both the ICRC and the Allies for supplying and, in the case of the latter, liberating the camps, was the forced evacuation by the Germans of POWs and concentration camp internees westwards away from the advancing Red Army. Owing to a lack of adequate transport the evacuation, hastily prepared to begin with, degenerated into a

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<sup>733</sup> This policy was not made official until 18 April 1945, when the ICRC sent telegrams to all camp commandants requesting that parcels be distributed equally to all nationalities – *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.87.

series of brutal marches in which the poorly provisioned prisoners were led across the length and breadth of a snow-covered and battle-scarred Germany. This mass evacuation, referred to as The March by those who suffered through it, was arguably the greatest trauma inflicted upon Allied POWs in Europe during the Second World War. Although previous forced marches had taken place in 1940 the bitter weather conditions, greater number of marchers, on-going military operations and the utter chaos and disorganisation of the exercise made The March of 1944-45 incomparably harsher. It also made the ICRC's efforts to bring relief to those involved that much more difficult.

An example of how difficult is evident in the tale of one of the first instances of evacuation on 13 July, when the prisoners of Stalag Luft VI (Heydekrug) were abruptly ordered by their guards to gather whatever they could carry in preparation for departure within half an hour. Their destination and means of getting there were not specified by their captors, who also did not inform either the Protecting Power or the ICRC of their plans. In fact, the directive was simply that the prisoners be moved away from the Russian's line of advance. Half of those evacuated from Heydekrug eventually ended their journey 200 miles south at Thorn, having endured a thirty-six hour train journey in enclosed cattle wagons.

The second group suffered a far longer ordeal, beginning with a sixty-hour voyage across the Baltic in an overcrowded coal barge. Once they arrived at the port of Swinemünde in Pomerania, they were shackled, subjected to several hours of travel in cattle wagons and finally marched through a dense pine forest towards their destination, Stalag Luft IV (Gross Tychow). This camp soon became overcrowded with the arrival of further groups of

evacuees and was in turn evacuated on 6 February, this time without any transportation to assist the prisoners.<sup>734</sup>

What made matters worse for the marchers was that it was only in the days following the evacuation from Gross Tychow that the ICRC and the Allies began fully to comprehend what was going on, not just at that camp, but across the entire eastern half of the Reich. Lack of notification from the Germans, disruption to POW mail services and the uncertainty of the evacuations had cut off the means of contact between the prisoners and the Allied leadership.<sup>735</sup> The Allies therefore, were dependent on information from the ICRC and Protecting Power inspectors.

Not surprisingly, it was Harry Phillimore who first recognised this situation and assessed its gravity.<sup>736</sup> On 24 January 1945 he expressed concern to the Foreign Office that 'with the advance of the Russian armies it is possible that the Germans may move prisoner of war camps'. He requested, therefore, that the Protecting Power be consulted immediately for any information it had on the matter. Phillimore also indicated that the ICRC should be contacted, albeit in an afterthought that he scribbled in pen over the telegram.<sup>737</sup>

The Protecting Power was the first to confirm Phillimore's fears. The Swiss Embassy in Berlin, however, stressed the optimistic opinion that, due to time

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<sup>734</sup> Nichol and Rennell, *Last Escape*, pp.20-25, 406; MacKenzie, *Colditz Myth*, p.360.

<sup>735</sup> Some of the POWs possessed radios, however, they were only capable of one-way communication and so could only be used by the prisoners to keep abreast of developments in the war – Nichol and Rennell, *Last Escape*, p.154.

<sup>736</sup> The British had first been made aware of this possibility of evacuations February 1944, when a report was received detailing the forced removal by cattle truck of POWs from Stalag III G (Steglitz). The Protecting Power were asked to launch a protest and at that the issue ended – TNA:PRO FO 916/888 – DPW to PWD, 19 February 1944.

<sup>737</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/1156 – WO to FO, 24 January 1945. An amended version of Phillimore's note, including the ICRC in the request, was sent out a day later.

constraints, evacuations could not possibly take place before the camps were taken over by the Russians on their inexorable westward march. The Swiss argued that sick and wounded prisoners and a lack of provisions would slow down the Germans' plans.<sup>738</sup>

This assessment gave the Foreign Office a dangerously naïve view of the situation. The Swiss did not take into account the fact that the Germans neglected time-consuming preparations regarding the prisoner's welfare in favour of rapid, ill-provisioned flight.<sup>739</sup> It was the very speed of the evacuations that also caught the ICRC off guard. The fact that four camps were evacuated in the space of ten days during late January, combined with the breakdown of communications, made the Committee's monitoring activities difficult to maintain.<sup>740</sup> The result was that throughout February the British relied on the Swiss Embassy in Berlin for information on The March, whilst criticising the ICRC for its lack of reporting on the POW's movements.<sup>741</sup>

Given the many instances throughout the war in which Geneva's information was passed over in favour of that supplied by the Protecting Power, it seems strange that the British should have been concerned with the ICRC's apparent negligence. The reason for this was that, as in 1940, the loss of stability in the POW situation led the British to a panicked dependency on the ICRC that, given the scale of the communications and transport collapse in 1945, the latter could not this time fulfil in an expeditious manner. This, at least, is the

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<sup>738</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/343 – Berne to FO, 26 January 1945.

<sup>739</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/1156 – PWD Report on The March, 8 March 1945.

<sup>740</sup> These were Stalag Luft VII (Bankau) on 19 January, Stalag 344 (Lamsdorf) on 22 January, Stalag XX-B (Marienburg) on 23 January and Stalag Luft III (Sagan) on 27 January – Nichol and Rennell, *Last Escape*, pp.405-406.

<sup>741</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/1156 – Berne to FO, 1, 6, 19, 21, 25 February 1945; WO to FO, 16 February 1945.

reason proffered in the ICRC's official report.<sup>742</sup> Another reason why the Committee failed to give the British regular reports on the evacuation of the POW camps – which the Protecting Power was somehow able to do<sup>743</sup> – may have been because, during the early weeks of February, many in Geneva were less concerned with Allied POWs than they were with civilian, specifically Jewish, internees.

Since late autumn the Committee's leadership had discussed the idea of approaching the highest ranks of the Nazi leadership, either Hitler or Himmler, with the aim of securing last minute protection for concentration camp prisoners. Unsurprisingly, the candidate put forward for this task was Burckhardt, who, despite the claims of the ICRC's official historian, was not the instigator of the negotiations and was, in fact, contacted by Himmler on 2 February.<sup>744</sup> Burckhardt had been approached, like Count Folke Bernadotte, his opposite number in the Swedish Red Cross, by agents of Himmler as part of the *Reichsführer-SS's* clumsy attempts to broker peace and rectify the image of the SS during the war's final stages by releasing or granting concessions to Jewish and other civilian internees.<sup>745</sup>

As Burckhardt mused on this invitation over the course of February, he received information from Rolf Nordling, the Swedish Consul in Paris, detailing attempts by the Swedes to broker the release of Jewish prisoners. As Jean-

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<sup>742</sup> ICRC Report, vol.3, p.86.

<sup>743</sup> The Protecting Power's reports were based on the observations of camp inspectors. They were generally concise in nature and provided information on which camps had been evacuated, but little on the actual conditions of the March itself – TNA:PRO FO 916/1156 – Berne to FO, 1, 6, 19, 21, 25 February 1945.

<sup>744</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.592-93; Favez, *Holocaust*, p.262.

<sup>745</sup> For discussion of the Bernadotte/Himmler talks see Walter Schellenberg, *The Memoirs of Hitler's Spymaster*, ed. and trans. Louis Hagan (London, 2006), ch.38-40; Ralph Hewins, *Count Folke Bernadotte: His Life and Work* (London, 1949), pp.112-114; Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, ch.12.



Claude Favez has suggested, Burckhardt, who had been officially named ICRC president on 1 January, was in no mood to have his Committee's thunder stolen by the Swedes.<sup>746</sup>

Possessed of the 'viewpoint of the historian who measures on a big scale',<sup>747</sup> Burckhardt realised that in Himmler's offer there was an opportunity not only to boost his image for posterity, but also, perhaps, to fulfil his dream of negotiating peace, albeit belatedly. This matter of prestige and reputation contributed in no small part to the Red Cross man finally contacting Himmler on 18 February with the aim of organising a face to face meeting.

This already complex series of events became further complicated on 20 February when Burckhardt was appointed, on the recommendation of Charles de Gaulle, as Swiss ambassador to France. Mindful of how important the negotiations with the SS would be, Burckhardt put off his official appointment in Paris until the matter with Himmler could be resolved. In a measure Burckhardt claimed was designed to assure ICRC neutrality – a laughable explanation if one considers his history – he used the appointment to Paris as an excuse to step down from the Committee and continue the negotiations as an independent diplomat.<sup>748</sup>

One suspects that, much as in 1937, Burckhardt was once again seeking to distance himself from the Committee which, despite its best efforts, had endured many failures on the issue of concentration camps during the war.<sup>749</sup> The reins of the presidency were passed back to Huber, leaving Burckhardt as

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<sup>746</sup> Favez, *Holocaust*, p.260.

<sup>747</sup> Description of Burckhardt from German staffer in Danzig – *DGFP*, Series C, vol.6 – Luckwald To Foreign Ministry, 16 April 1937, doc.320, p.659.

<sup>748</sup> Favez, *Holocaust*, pp.256-259; Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.592-93.

<sup>749</sup> See Introduction, p.16

an independent actor in the drama despite his honorary title of "President on Leave" – a leave from which he decided never to return.<sup>750</sup>

The outcome of Burckhardt's discussions with the SS will be discussed below. For now it is enough to note that these upheavals in Geneva, together with the pre-occupation with publicity and concentration camp internees, coincided with Whitehall's sudden, panicked interest in POW matters. The result was that for the crucial three weeks in which the British sought to gain an informed view of the situation, the attentions of the ICRC leadership were elsewhere.

That is not to suggest that the ICRC abandoned the POWs. Prestige and public opinion were still important for the Committee, especially following the highly publicised arrival at the Swiss border on 8 February of 1,200 Jews, led by the former president of Switzerland Jean-Marie Musy, who had directly negotiated with Himmler for the prisoners' removal from Theresienstadt.<sup>751</sup>

Furthermore, for the ICRC delegates on the ground the heightened concern for concentration camp inmates, some of whom were involved in The March, could not be divorced from the fate of the POWs. Any lapse in focus on the latter issue was, therefore, purely temporary. Indeed, as the streams of marchers grew both in size and despair over the course of January and February the affairs of both categories of war victim – hitherto carefully segregated – became enmeshed as never before. It also became clear towards the end of January that the evacuations were being made with no

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<sup>750</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.593.

<sup>751</sup> Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, p.225, 230, 243.

regard for nationality, which led to the destination camps being populated by multiple nationalities of civilian and military internees.<sup>752</sup>

This breakdown in segregation, although seemingly troublesome and confusing, perfectly suited the ICRC's preferred method of providing impartial relief to all and, unsurprisingly, it resulted in the Committee performing some of its most admirable and important work of the Second World War. The extremes of the situation also resulted in the ICRC's long-held frustrations with the British moving to boiling point.

The problem of guaranteeing food supplies for all detainees was still the ICRC's main consideration. Having realised that provisions had not been organised for the marchers and that the camps the delegates eventually reached, such as Stalag 357 (Fallingbostel), were also practically devoid of parcels, the ICRC addressed the problem of making sure supplies were available for the prisoners at the various stops along their journey.<sup>753</sup> On 3 February the Committee's leadership consulted representatives of the BRC and ARC on the matter. The result was a striking and practical report on solutions to the problem that held back little and criticised the Allies for their handling of POW relief matters over the course of the previous year.

Emphasising the lack of transport and parcel depots, which were both needed to supply the marchers, the report bluntly declared that the ICRC required 'immediate, repeat, immediate, acceptance' of its proposal to pool all parcels, irrespective of their origin, for distribution to any POWs or civilians who

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<sup>752</sup> See ICRC:G3/23F/109 generally, in particular Bachman to Marti, 23 April 1945, in which Mauthausen is mentioned in the same sentence as the POW collection point at Moosburg; *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.89.

<sup>753</sup> The smaller of the two camps at Fallingbostel, by mid February Stalag 357 was deemed 'a very bad camp' by inspectors, who noted that reprisals were common and some buildings didn't even have ceilings – TNA:PRO WO 224/54 – ICRC Report on Fallingbostel, 11 February 1945.

needed them. The report also contained one of the few examples of exasperated criticism of the Allies that was put to paper by Geneva during the war. No doubt with the refusal of Zollinger's efforts to acquire transport in early 1944 in mind, The Red Cross delegates noted that they:

Cannot but deplore in this connection that our request made already 18 months ago to British and American authorities for delivery of 600 goods vans or material for construction thereof in Switzerland, which we submitted foreseeing that serious transport situation was bound to arise sooner or later was not acceded to. Had this then been accepted situation today would not be as tragic.

In a final salvo the report declared that the 'ICRC must decline responsibility if proposal should for one reason or another not be put into practice'.<sup>754</sup> This assertion was followed on 22 February by a statement from the ICRC to all belligerents and National Red Cross Societies indicating that rather than wait for an answer from the belligerents the Committee would begin pooling parcels immediately at Stalag VIIA (Moosburg) for distribution to 'any United Nations prisoners of war'.<sup>755</sup>

This missive, bold and acerbic, was prompted by two factors: The ICRC's pent-up frustrations with the Allies and the pressure, in light of public scrutiny of the concentration camp internee issue, to create a last minute miracle for civilian victims of the Third Reich. The resulting declaration to the Allies was long overdue; however, for those prisoners who ultimately benefited it was better late than never. In terms of British-ICRC relations it also represented something of a watershed. In telling – not asking – the belligerents about the details of its plans the Committee showed that it not only understood the gravity of the situation that was unfolding across Germany, but could also no longer tolerate Allied interference in its plans to deal with it. The ICRC was at

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<sup>754</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/343 – ICRC to ICRC London, 16 February 1945.

<sup>755</sup> TNA:PRO FO 1049/26 – ICRC to ICRC London, 22 February 1945.

last attempting to dictate the terms of the relationship through forceful actions rather than polite words.

This philosophy was also reflected in the Committee's approach to gathering information on the marchers which, although undeniably slower than the efforts of the Protecting Power, provided a more complete picture of the scale of the evacuations. In early February the ICRC knew roughly which camps had been evacuated, but it was not until 28 February that Robert Schirmer, Marti's deputy at the Berlin delegation, filed a report with the US Embassy in Berne.

Having tracked the marchers across northern Germany, spoken to various POWs and German officials and also compiled information from other ICRC delegates in other areas of the Reich, Schirmer identified three distinct lines of march. These were a southern line bound for Schongau and consisting of 80,000 marchers, a central line of 60,000 marchers heading in the direction of Dresden and a colossal northern line of 100,000 prisoners marching towards Hamburg and Lubeck. In the case of each column of prisoners Schirmer provided information on their approximate location, status of supplies and health conditions, noting that the southern line was plagued by dysentery and the northern line had come under repeated attack from Allied aircraft.<sup>756</sup>

By the time Schirmer's detailed report was received the harrowing account served primarily to clarify opinion in the Allied camp that something needed to be done. Already, on 21 February, the War Office had agreed with Washington to hand the problem of supplying the POWs over to SHAEF. This was a wise move that prompted swift and decisive action. Within days of being put in

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<sup>756</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/1156 – Schirmer Report, dated 2 March. Originally filed with the US Embassy in Berne on 28 February 1945.

charge of POW relief Eisenhower authorised the release of a hundred trucks and fuel to the ICRC and approved a plan for two relief convoys to be sent from Lubeck and Geneva into the prisoner assembly points at Moosburg and Marienburg.<sup>757</sup>

The sudden willingness on the part of the Allies to take decisive action was prompted by a combination of the ICRC's assertiveness and a belated realisation that the POW situation had spiralled out of control. The Committee's ultimatum of 16 February and the appearance of Schirmer's report a week later were well timed in that they gave weight to concerns, already prevalent in Whitehall, over a possible backlash from the public, similar to that which occurred in 1940, if the situation with the POWs dragged on without Allied intervention.<sup>758</sup>

Even with this evident need to act, however, the old habits of the British died hard. The War Office was apprehensive of the idea of newly-pooled American and British parcels being distributed to the Russians and, although discretion was placed in the hands of the Committee, it was made clear by the British and the ARC that the trucks supplied by the latter were intended to be used only for the benefit of British and American POWs.<sup>759</sup> The British Chiefs of Staff went a step further, expressing doubts that the ICRC's ambitious scheme for mobile relief could even be executed. There were the usual lamentations over the 'organisational problems involved' and emphasis was placed on the need for various departments to compile further reports before a decision on the ICRC's proposal could be made.<sup>760</sup>

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<sup>757</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.188. For an outline of SHAEF's plan see TNA:PRO WO 193/345 – SHAEF to WO, 5 March 1945.

<sup>758</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/348 – Minutes of War Cabinet Meeting, 19 February 1945.

<sup>759</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/1181 – WO to ICRC London, 3 March 1945; *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.197.

<sup>760</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/343 – Chiefs of Staff Committee Memo, 19 February 1945.

Despite these, by now near-instinctive, expressions of doubt over the ICRC's plans, there was a realisation in Whitehall of how obsolete and unpopular such concerns were in light of the increasingly desperate POW situation. Rather than actively obstructing the Committee on these issues, both Washington and Whitehall opted instead merely to convey their doubts before offloading the perpetually difficult POW issue into the hands of Eisenhower. This attitude on the part of the Allied governments and the Chiefs of Staff was a blessing in disguise for the prisoners, who by 8 March had received 500 tonnes of supplies courtesy of SHAEF's plans and the ICRC's willingness and ability to execute them. The success of this initial relief mission was crucial for future relief operations. Having seen the merits of the ICRC's plan the Germans also opened the floodgates, authorising the Committee to send as many trucks as it could over the Swiss border for the purposes of relief – an act that in turn, prompted SHAEF to release more vehicles to Geneva.<sup>761</sup> By mid-March, therefore, the ICRC's plans for mobile and fluid relief, first proposed almost a year earlier, were at last coming to fruition and notably without the direct input of the British government.

Having crossed the border into the shattered German countryside, those delegates who accompanied the relief convoys were soon made aware of how justified their Committee's insistence on the trucks had been. Far from an organised column, two groups of prisoners that had left eastern Germany and Czechoslovakia, and each comprising close to 6,000 marchers, were spread out over hundreds of kilometres and led by German commandants with little idea of their location. In such circumstances the ICRC's vehicles were crucial

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<sup>761</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/345 – SHAEF to WO, 10 March 1945.

for supplying those prisoners who had been lost, injured or simply left behind by their fellow marchers.<sup>762</sup>

Elsewhere, Burckhardt – still mindful of public opinion – continued to work on the problem of the Jews. On 12 March 1945 he crossed the Swiss border at the town of Feldkirch and met Himmler's deputy, *SS-Obergruppenführer* Ernst Kaltenbrunner, to discuss the possible release of Jewish, French and Polish prisoners. The negotiations were not entirely successful and in the end only limited releases were secured.<sup>763</sup> Furthermore, the supposedly clandestine negotiations – the substance of which Burckhardt reported to the Swiss Federal Council – were one of the worst kept secrets in diplomatic circles, with Allen Dulles and the Foreign Office also being made aware of the outcome of the talks.<sup>764</sup>

Although achieving only negligible success, the process and intent of Burckhardt's "secret discussions" were indicative of the changes he had made to the ICRC, particularly in regards to its relations with belligerents. As Burckhardt himself remarked to Georges Dunand, an ICRC delegate in Slovakia, the new mantra for the ICRC was to 'go straight ahead....but be careful that the Committee does not have to disown you'.<sup>765</sup> To this end, during the war's final weeks the ICRC's delegates distributed supplies, negotiated with SS officers and provided protection for inmates – when

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<sup>762</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.191.

<sup>763</sup> For discussion of the outcome of the Burckhardt/Kaltenbrunner talks see Favez, *Holocaust*, pp.263-64. Another perspective, highlighting Kaltenbrunner's evasiveness and Burckhardt's 'satisfaction' with the talks, is presented by Walter Schellenberg – Schellenberg, *Memoirs*, pp.432-433.

<sup>764</sup> *Documents Diplomatiques Suisses 1848-1945*, Series 1, vol.14 (Berne, 1997) – Burckhardt's Report on Kaltenbrunner meeting – 17 March 1945, doc.E2001 (D) 3/474, pp.1006-1009; Petersen, *Hitler's Doorstep*, Document 5-64, Telegram 6909, 14 March 1945, pp.473-474; TNA/PRO/FO 371/51193 – Berne to FO, 29 March 1945.

<sup>765</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.460.



permitted – at concentration camps at Türkheim, Dachau, Theresienstadt and Budapest.<sup>766</sup>

In addition to these unorthodox measures, when the delegate Louis Haefliger was refused permission to enter Mauthausen by the hard-line commandant Franz Ziereis, Burckhardt – despite officially having stood down from the Committee – interjected. Not only did Burckhardt apprise American troops close to Mauthausen of the situation, but he also sent a message to Ziereis, warning him that if any more inmates died whilst Haefliger waited outside the gates, it would be on the Nazi's head. Haefliger was permitted entry to the camp on 5 May.<sup>767</sup>

The ICRC's new found sense of ingenuity, adaptation and it must be said, bravery, was also prevalent in its handling of the POW crisis. The main tactic adopted by the delegates was to manipulate the Germans' need to appear compassionate to the war's victors. The brokering of deals with German commandants and the recruitment of both SS guards and some of the fitter POWs for the purposes of unloading supplies was commonplace.<sup>768</sup> Marti's delegation was even able to gain permission from the Germans for US and British aircraft carrying supplies to land forty kilometres south of Berlin, an initiative that was crucial to supplying the central line of The March.<sup>769</sup>

As always, however, the ICRC could do little to protect the POWs from acts of violence, especially those inflicted on them by their own forces. As the trucks left Switzerland for Germany the question of immunity from air attack was

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<sup>766</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.603-604. For discussion of the ICRC's efforts in Hungary see Wagner, *Righteous of Switzerland*, pp.195-205; Favez, *Holocaust*, pp.236-42.

<sup>767</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.463.

<sup>768</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, pp.90-91.

<sup>769</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/1181 – FO to Berne, 9 March 1945; *ICRC Report*, vol.3, p.92.

still unresolved. Instances of POW and civilian internees being strafed – the columns were usually mistaken for retreating *Wehrmacht* troops – continued until 8 May. An entire file in the British National Archives is devoted to accounts of these “friendly fire” incidents.<sup>770</sup>

In the midst of such violence, the ICRC was itself unprotected. On 3 March the Foreign Office declared that the Allies could not guarantee the ICRC’s trucks immunity from air attack, even though they were painted white and emblazoned with the Red Cross emblem. Concern was even raised over the displaying of the Red Cross emblem, as it was feared that the safety implied by its presence might attract scavenging German troops – an ironic concern given the many attacks on Red Cross marked vehicles.<sup>771</sup>

In a reply mimicking that of the Admiralty over Red Cross shipping, the most the Allied leadership did was to inform Bomber Command to have its pilots keep an eye out for the Red Cross trucks.<sup>772</sup> For their part the Germans recognised the Red Cross markings but also refused to guarantee protection.

<sup>773</sup> The belligerents’ refusal to acknowledge the status of the Red Cross emblem contravened the Geneva Convention. As an example of how far the nature of the conflict had pushed those ideals aside, however, the ICRC appealed to neither government on this issue. Instead of protests and appeals the Committee remained focused on seeing out the final, horrific, weeks of the war as best it could, irrespective of the increased danger its delegates now faced.

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<sup>770</sup> See TNA:PRO FO 916/1184.

<sup>771</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/345 – FO to Stockholm, 3 March 1945.

<sup>772</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/1181 – Air Ministry to Bomber Command HQ, 14 March 1945; TNA:PRO WO 219/243 – SHAEF to Air Ministry, 29 April 1945.

<sup>773</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, pp.195-96.

In the context of these difficult circumstances, the ICRC's operations during the spring of 1945 ran quite smoothly and with great success. In addition to smaller collection areas, three large parcel depots were set up at key POW muster points: Neubrandenburg in the north of Germany and Moosburg and Ravensbrück in the south. Furthermore, for many of the camps to which delivery was re-established, parcels were delivered at a rate of one parcel per man per week from mid-March until the end of the war.<sup>774</sup>

Although many prisoners had gone without parcels for weeks, gratitude at the sight of the Red Cross trucks – dubbed the “White Angels” – dispersed any feelings of resentment. The British MOC at Moosburg expressed his ‘most fervent thanks’ for the efforts of the delegates, and Robert Gale at Stalag 357 described the arrival of the Red Cross as nothing less than a starvation-averting ‘miracle’.<sup>775</sup> A representative of the British POWs scattered around Lubeck went so far as to write personally to the commander of the newly arrived British occupation force praising the efforts of Paul de Blonay, the ICRC's delegate in Lubeck, and requesting that he be retained as part of the occupation force's relief management.<sup>776</sup>

This praise for the delegates was deserved, for during the war's final weeks the ICRC undoubtedly went above and beyond the call of duty. If, however, the story of the ICRC in the Second World War tells us anything, it is that the willingness of the delegates to bring relief to victims of war could only be implemented in so far as was permitted by the belligerents. In the case of the Committee's efforts in early 1945 its most willing facilitators were not the British, American or German governments, but, oddly, the military forces

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<sup>774</sup> Ibid. pp.90-93.

<sup>775</sup> ICRC:G23/26F/109 – C.H. Burgess to Mock (ICRC delegate at Moosburg), 20 April 1945; MacKenzie, *Colditz Myth*, p.368.

<sup>776</sup> ICRC:G23/26F/109 – Captain Bauer to Lieutenant-Colonel Hoseason, 3 May 1945.

representing both sides. The importance of proximity in the formulation of humanitarian policy is evident.

Unlike the prevaricating Allied government officials, SHAEF – represented and informed by soldiers on the ground in Europe, some of whom had seen the concentration camps first hand – cooperated with the ICRC's plans almost immediately. In addition to the importance of SHAEF sharing awareness with the ICRC over the extremities of the situation, the involvement of the Allied military also allowed for a better understanding of how the variable conditions on the ground could affect the Committee's relief efforts. On 29 March Eisenhower was able to insist, with some confidence, that the 'present rapid advances' of the Allied armies meant that POW relief operations had to be completed without delay.<sup>777</sup> Few Allied government officials, with the exception of the ex-soldier Harry Phillimore, understood this correlation between military and humanitarian efforts.

In terms of this synchronization, the British government's policy had been to do the minimum required in the hope that the ICRC, once summoned, would take care of the rest. Once it became apparent over the course of January that more than Geneva's will would be required, the entire programme was, wisely, placed in the hands of SHAEF which, owing to its military structure, resources and proximity to the chaos within Germany, was more willing than the government officials to work with the ICRC on the matter of POWs. Eisenhower, in particular, seems to have understood the threat posed to POWs and the importance of maintaining a close working relationship with the Committee. Even when rejecting the ICRC's proposal for immunity zones, he

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<sup>777</sup> TNA:PRO WO 193/345 – SHAEF Circular Memorandum, 29 March 1945.

emphasised that the response should not in any way question the competence of the Red Cross.<sup>778</sup>

SHAEF also did whatever it could to prevent attacks on Red Cross vehicles. In April a top secret report was received by SHAEF indicating that Allied aircraft were still attacking Red Cross convoys in northern Germany – 16 trucks had apparently been destroyed in the course of one week. This, along with an earlier report of attacks by British fighters on the *Henry Dunant* and the *Halleren* off the coast of Holland, prompted SHAEF's Air Staff to send a terse circular to Whitehall's Air Ministry and nearby US Air Force Commands, which led to a ban on the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force attacking any vehicles or personnel seen on roads. This energetic and supportive response by SHAEF was in striking contrast to that of the Air Ministry, which, following the policy adopted by Whitehall during the *Embla* attacks, had remarked only that the 'Incident [was] regrettable but cannot be clearly identified and such accidents [were] inevitable during intense operations'.<sup>779</sup>

The inflexibility of the Air Ministry on this occasion further highlights the invaluable role played by SHAEF as both a facilitator of humanitarian activities and a moderating liaison between the ICRC, the War Office and the Chiefs of Staff – all of which received regular and detailed reports on the results of the Committee's successful relief missions.<sup>780</sup>

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<sup>778</sup> TNA:PRO WO 219/33 – Eisenhower to AFHQ, 19 June 1944. In addition to being more open than the Allied governments to the efforts of the ICRC and the ARC during the invasion, Eisenhower kept himself abreast of the problem of protecting POWs and, although he advocated a swift conclusion to military operations as the best remedy for the problem, recommended to the Allied governments that a warning should be issued to the Germans that any unwarranted acts of violence would be met with war crimes prosecution. In April he agreed to extend this warning to include civilian deportees and foreign workers in Germany – TNA:PRO WO 193/345 – Eisenhower Circular Memo, 29 March 1945; TNA:PRO WO 193/359 – Minutes of Chiefs Of Staff Committee Meeting, 24 April 1945.

<sup>779</sup> TNA:PRO WO 219/242 – SHAEF to Air Ministry, 14 April 1945; SHAEF to Air Ministry, 29 April 1945; SHAEF Report, 26 April 1945.

<sup>780</sup> See generally TNA:PRO WO 193/345.

The only real sore point in relations between SHAEF and the ICRC was the former's refusal to allow the delegates access to the transit camps for German POWs – which were little more than cages or open-air barbed-wire enclosures – until the end of October 1944.<sup>781</sup> Aside from this problem, tellingly similar to that encountered by the ICRC in dealing with the OKW in 1940, the Committee found in SHAEF a willing partner that it had been unable to find in Whitehall for the duration of the war. The co-operation between the ICRC and the military, prompted by necessity during the final catastrophic weeks of the war, was, however, short-lived. What came after the dissolution of this co-operation is highly symptomatic of the ICRC's story during the Second World War.

### **POST-WAR: A RETURN TO THE STATUS QUO?**

As the war in Europe concluded the Allies and the ICRC both turned their attentions to the problem of how best to ensure that the liberated, POW and civilian alike, survived to enjoy their freedom. The solution to this problem was far from simple. In the wake of the conflict Europe was a shattered landscape, short of food and medical supplies and lacking infrastructure, flooded with the wounded, the homeless and the starving. These civilian refugees – close to 7 million in the summer of 1945 – constituted a dependent and transient category of war victim: Displaced Persons (DP).

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<sup>781</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/938 – SHAEF to Peake, 21 August 1944; WO to PWD, 30 October 1944; MacDonogh, *After the Reich: From the Liberation of Vienna to the Berlin Airlift* (London, 2007), p.1, pp.392-95. For description of the camps see Loringhoven, Bernd Freytag von and D'Alañon, François, *In the Bunker with Hitler: The Last Witness Speaks* (London, 2005), p.183-87. For general discussion on the Allied treatment of German POWs see Stephen E. Ambrose and Gunter Bischof, eds., *Eisenhower and the German POWs: Facts Against Falsehood*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1992.

By July 1945 many of the DPs had found new homes, or at least temporary respite from their wanderings, in the newly established system of DP camps. The question of how to sustain them, plus the 7.8 million German POWs held by the Allies and the 12 million German expatriates, the *Volksdeutsche*, who were moving back into Germany from territories recovered by Poland, remained a problem to be solved.<sup>782</sup>

Despite its eminent qualifications for the task of co-ordinating relief efforts for these victims of war, the ICRC was left out of the Allies' plans for post-war Europe. As a dynamic in specific British-ICRC wartime relations the relief operations during the first months of peace are a point of minor significance. What follows, therefore, is not an assessment of the details of the ICRC's post-war humanitarian work, but more an illustration of what the British did and did not learn about the ICRC, and humanitarian operations in general, during the Second World War.

The ICRC and the British government both began their preparations for post-war Europe early. The British, in fact, pre-empted the ICRC in this regard. In 1940 Churchill, following his "victory before relief" policy, ordered the stockpiling of foodstuffs. Ironically this forward thinking was a product of MEW's blockade policy, which dictated that rather than shipping food into Europe during the war, stockpiles should be created for the eventual day of liberation. In 1941 the British stockpiling initiative was placed under the auspices of the newly created Inter-Allied Committee on Post War Requirements (IACPR), a branch of MEW headed by the Ministry's Director General, Sir Frederick Leith-Ross.<sup>783</sup>

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<sup>782</sup> Giles MacDonogh, *After The Reich*, 392-392; Mark Wyman, *DP: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945-51* (London, 1989), pp.18-23.

<sup>783</sup> Leith-Ross was in charge of diplomatic duties at the MEW prior to 1942 and was generally more of a moderate than Dalton and Lord Drogheda – Roger Middleton, 'Ross, Sir Frederick

Leith-Ross' convivial demeanour, coupled with the fact that – unlike matters relating to blockade policy – the implementation of post-war relief plans were distant considerations, served to help build better co-operation between the IACPR and the ICRC than the latter had enjoyed with MEW's blockade enforcers.

In July 1942, for example, Burckhardt and Leith-Ross worked together on a proposal for a new meat-wheatmeal compound biscuit to be distributed to calorie-starved civilians and POWs in the immediate post-war period. The less experimental measure of stockpiling goods in Geneva was received with cautious approval by the IACPR provided, of course, that the stockpiles did not move beyond Swiss borders prior to the rest of Europe's liberation.<sup>784</sup>

Once this liberation had occurred these restrictions were relaxed and the British agreed to the ICRC shipping supplies out of Switzerland, provided that Whitehall was informed how much each country was getting in order to better manage the quota system MEW had developed for equitable post-war food allocation. So healthy was co-operation between the ICRC and the British on this issue, the Ministry of Food even went so far as to cut the Committee in on a deal it had brokered with Argentina for purchasing cheap foodstuffs.<sup>785</sup>

This type of co-operation on the part of the British was logical for a number of reasons, the first and most obvious being the change in conditions from war to peace. After 8 May MEW's chief complaint throughout the war – the seizure

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William Leith (1887–1968)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, Jan 2008  
<http://www.oxforddnb.com/prospero.murdoch.edu.au/view/article/34489>, (accessed 6 March 2009).

<sup>784</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1224 – Leith-Ross to Burckhardt, 5 June 1942; N. Burckhardt to IACPR, 24 July 1942.

<sup>785</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.3, pp.376-377; TNA:PRO FO 371/51468 – Minutes of Interdepartmental meeting with ICRC delegation, 13 June 1945.



of ICRC goods by the Germans and the threat of ICRC-Nazi collusion – was no longer an issue. Additionally, the permission granted the ICRC for distributing relief during the first weeks of peace was in keeping with Whitehall's insistence throughout the war that humanitarian efforts could only be effectively undertaken once hostilities were brought to a close. The British, therefore, were as good as their word when it came to facilitating humanitarian operations once the war had ended. This did not mean, however, that they intended the ICRC should lead the relief effort.

In 1943 the British and the Americans created the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA), a body designed to coordinate post-war relief operations for the benefit of 'nationals of the United Nations, stateless persons, and Italian nationals'. In 1944, UNRRA's duties were extended to cover relief for all DPs throughout Europe, with the exception of the *Volksdeutsche*.<sup>786</sup> As the final stage of the war in Europe began SHAEF ordered UNRRA to begin forming two-hundred teams, each comprised of thirteen members tasked with following the Allied armies' advance through Western Europe and dealing with any refugees they encountered along the way. It was at this point that UNRRA, having been activated, proved to be a flawed entity, unfit for the task for which it was designed.

For example, although there had been two years preparation for the relief operation, there were only eight UNRRA teams available by spring 1945.<sup>787</sup> The co-ordination of these units with the Allied armies was also generally

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<sup>786</sup> This term "United Nations" was coined by Roosevelt for the purpose of the Atlantic Charter and originally applied only to the Allied nations of the Second World War – George Woodbridge, *UNRRA: The History of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration*, 3 vols. (New York, 1950), hereafter *UNRRA History*, vol.2, p.508.

<sup>787</sup> By June 1945 the number of teams had increased to 300, still 150 teams short of SHAEF's requirements – TNA:PRO FO 371/51096 – Sub-Committee Report on UNRRA Activities, 5 July 1945.

poor, despite official agreements that were made between SHAEF and UNRRA in 1944.<sup>788</sup> Even UNRRA's official history concedes that 'the duties that UNRRA was supposed to perform were not set with precision or exactitude'.<sup>789</sup>

Within weeks of their activation the members of the UNRRA teams, mostly volunteers ranging from doctors to de-mobilised air raid wardens, also gained a reputation for being 'not entirely effective', 'more concerned with their own personal interests than with doing their respective jobs' and in general being unprepared for the mammoth tasks of their office.<sup>790</sup> The efficiency of these teams also suffered from a lack of transport and supplies, which led to them being overly-reliant first on SHAEF and then, after the creation of the Allied zones of occupation in July, the various occupation forces.<sup>791</sup>

Despite the bad reputation it earned for its sluggish start, UNRRA continued to receive support from Britain and the United States, which together pumped \$10 billion into the troubled organisation's coffers between July 1945 and June 1947. Owing in no small part to this support UNRRA overcame its initial difficulties and came to play a pivotal role in averting epidemics of starvation and disease throughout Europe.<sup>792</sup> Nevertheless it is notable that UNRRA, an untested and initially unqualified entity, was placed in charge of the European relief effort by the Allies when the more established and more experienced

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<sup>788</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London, 2005), pp.28-29; Wyman, *DP* pp.46-49; Stafford, *Endgame*, p.18, 373-74. For details of the agreements see *UNRRA History*, vol.2, pp.3-5.

<sup>789</sup> *UNRRA History*, vol.2, p.535.

<sup>790</sup> For outline of UNRRA's initial problems see TNA:PRO FO 371/51902 – Mason to Hammer, 26 April 1945; TNA:PRO FO 371/51087 – SHAEF to AGWAR, 28 March 1945; *UNRRA History*, vol.1, pp.39-41.

<sup>791</sup> The Western Allies' three zones of occupation covered an area of central Europe administrated by the French, US and British forces, that stretched from Klagenfurt in southern Austria to the Baltic port of Flensburg, from the Harz Mountains in central Germany to the western borders of the Rhineland – Stafford, *Endgame*, p.487.

<sup>792</sup> For an overview of UNRRA's successes beyond its official history see Wyman, *DP*, pp.46-52.

ICRC was willing and able to assist. In effect, UNRRA found itself in 1945 in a similarly unprepared situation to that in which the ICRC had been in 1940.

Once UNRRA failures became apparent Whitehall's recourse was not to the ICRC but to the BRC whose delegates, it was suggested, could provide excellent replacements for UNRRA's struggling volunteers.<sup>793</sup> This suggestion was a continuation of an earlier rebuff to the Committee by the Allies. Prior to D-Day Geneva was deliberately excluded when the Allied governments decided to recognise only the BRC and the ARC – incorrectly deemed to be 'quasi military organisations' – as suitable to conduct humanitarian operations in the wake of the Allies' advance.<sup>794</sup> Despite the Committee's good working relationship with SHAEF during the war's final months, the suggestion that the BRC assist UNRRA indicates that the ICRC had done little to earn the respect and trust of the Allied authorities as a competent operator in the field. Before examining the reasons why the Committee was slighted in this manner, it is important to first establish where the ICRC saw itself in relation to UNRRA.

Owing to its wartime experiences and its generally co-operative relations with the IACPR, the Committee believed that it would have a crucial, if not *the* crucial, role in the post-war relief effort. This intention was made clear to the belligerents in April 1945 when Max Huber released a circular memorandum stating that:

as long as there are prisoners of war and occupied territories there will be circumstances in which an institution independent of both victors and vanquished, acting only for humanitarian purposes and hampered by no political ties, can be of service. Moreover, the Committee's wealth of experience and

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<sup>793</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/51087 – FO Minutes, 12 April 1945.

<sup>794</sup> TNA:PRO WO 219/33 – SHAEF to WO, 25 March 1944; Combined Civil Affairs Committee Memo, 12 May 1944.

network of delegations render it capable of performing useful work in the difficult transition period following the end of hostilities.<sup>795</sup>

This declaration was not a hollow one. As the previous chapters have shown, and as the ICRC's official historian points out, at the close of hostilities the Committee was, owing to its war time expansion, the 'largest non-governmental body for distributing relief' in Europe.<sup>796</sup> Furthermore, the ICRC's growing penchant for innovation, the recent success of its collaboration with SHAEF and the field experience of delegates like Roland Marti and Marcel Junod placed it in the unique position of being both immediately on the ground and, owing to the stockpiles in Switzerland, ready to help co-ordinate the management of the inevitable refugee crisis. Yet, from the very beginning of UNRRA's operations, the ICRC was pushed into the role of junior partner – an outcome that brought an understandable degree of annoyance in Geneva.

In discussing the ICRC's relationship with UNRRA the Committee's official historian is, typically, less than forthcoming on details. Durand's choice of words, however, is revealing enough. In addition to alluding to the ICRC as being overseer of all other relief agencies, Durand downplayed the role of UNRRA as an organisation that merely 'gave considerable help' to the ICRC. This statement rings true, but only from a certain perspective.

Owing to UNRRA's mandate to provide relief only for non-ethnic German DPs, the ICRC was left as the primary provider of relief for German POWs the *Volksdeutsche* – a thankless task which, owing to global anti-German sentiment, did little for the ICRC's reputation.<sup>797</sup> Despite the criticisms it

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<sup>795</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.634-35 citing Max Huber memorandum, undated April 1945.

<sup>796</sup> Ibid, p.637.

<sup>797</sup> Catherine Rey-Schyr, *De Yalta à Dien Bien Phu: Histoire du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge 1945-1955* (Geneva, 2007), p.138, 178-180; François Bugnion, 'From the End of the Second

endured, the ICRC's assignment was a crucial one, particularly for those ethnic Germans the Committee helped. However, if one considers the ICRC's ambitious posture during the war's later years, Durand's language, Huber's hopeful proclamation in April 1945 and the delegate Nicholas Burckhardt's mocking recollection of UNRRA standing for 'You Never Really Relieved Anybody', it seems likely that the ICRC was expecting to be charged with the greater duty of co-ordinating relief for *all* of Europe.<sup>798</sup> This, however, was never on the Allies' agenda.

Although detailed plans were drawn up by the Allied leadership in 1944 for post-war co-operation between SHAEF and UNRRA, as well as an agreement for the latter to act as 'co-ordinating authority' for Red Cross Societies and the YMCA in distributing relief, no official plans were drawn up for ICRC-UNRRA co-operation.<sup>799</sup>

This is evident from the War Office's reaction to a query from the ICRC to set up a new office in Berlin on 11 May 1945. Although he had no objection, Colonel N.M. Hammer stressed that any ICRC operations in Germany had to be conducted under the auspices of UNRRA, which would also act as the conduit for correspondence between the Committee and SHAEF. Notably, Hammer stated that UNRRA's charter made 'special provision for co-operation with the IRC'.<sup>800</sup> In fact, that charter only stated that UNRRA was authorised

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World War to the Dawn of the Third Millennium: the Activities of the International Committee of the Red Cross during the Cold War and its Aftermath: 1945-1995', *International Review of the Red Cross*, no.305 (1995) 207-224, p.208.

<sup>798</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.505 citing interview with Nicholas Burckhardt, July 1995.

<sup>799</sup> For SHAEF/UNRRA co-operation without mention of ICRC see generally TNA:PRO WO 219/3612; TNA:PRO FO 371/51081 – SHAEF to AGWAR, 11 January 1945.

<sup>800</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/51089 – FO to WO, 11 May 1945.

to 'designate or create agencies and to review the activities of agencies as created'.<sup>801</sup>

This scant reference to co-operation placed the ICRC in the same grouping as the YMCA, the Quakers and the World Council of Churches – well-meaning, yet amateur relief bodies that were to act more as UNRRA's agents than partners. The only notable instance in which the ICRC was seriously considered in UNRRA's plans was in the relief scheme for Romania, which – at the ICRC's request – was conducted by Geneva with assistance from UNRRA.

<sup>802</sup> This arrangement, however, was the exception, not the rule. Not only were the Committee's delegates snubbed as possible replacements for UNRRA workers, but at least one official from the Ministry of Food thought that 'the work of the International Red Cross will now tend to shrink', owing to UNRRA's presence.<sup>803</sup> For all its wartime development the ICRC of the post-war period was still generally regarded in British eyes as amateur.

There is much in the previous chapters to support this argument. Indeed, the British tendency to limit the ICRC's scope during the war can be best described as habitual. As much as this attitude provides some explanation for post-war British dismissal of the ICRC in favour of UNRRA, there was another, more political reason, for the Committee's downgrading. This was Moscow's clear repugnance and distrust for all things Swiss. This distrust was made evident when the Soviets shut down the ICRC's offices in Berlin in June 1945 and interned the delegation in Russia for several months.<sup>804</sup>

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<sup>801</sup> *Agreement for United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration* (Washington, 1943), hereafter *UNRRA Charter 1943*, Article 1.1.

<sup>802</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/51082 – Series of Telegrams proposing ICRC/UNRRA Operations in Romania, 4 December 1944.

<sup>803</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/52648 – Ministry of Food to MEW, 29 May 1945.

<sup>804</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.1, p.436.

The Soviet view not only influenced Whitehall's attitude to the ICRC's role in the post-war period, but it was also a primary reason for the Allies keeping faith with UNRRA despite its initial failures. When considering post-war relief plans, for example, the Foreign Office was concerned that the relative freedom granted 'a multifarious collection of Red Cross and other Societies running about Germany' would upset the Soviets. Accordingly, UNRRA's appointment as chief co-ordinating body was a means of placating Moscow by placing the 'voluntary societies' such as the ICRC and the YMCA under a greater degree of Allied control.<sup>805</sup>

This idea of controlling the ICRC to placate the Russians was also carried to the San Francisco Conference in April 1945, at which the United Nations charter was discussed and ratified. Prior to the conference the Foreign Office refused a proposal from the BRC for the ICRC to be recognised by name in the UN Charter for the purposes of having its position 'safeguarded' by the United Nations. The BRC's concern stemmed from the belief that the ICRC's neutral status was still not properly understood by the belligerents, an accusation that was backed up by an incident that occurred in the first weeks of peace when an ICRC delegate in Paris was accused of being a collaborator for providing relief parcels to German POWs.

Considering that such ignorance of the ICRC's position had been displayed by not only the French, but also the Germans, British and the Americans throughout the war, the request for a clause in the Charter pledging signatories 'to respect the independent and voluntary character of the Red

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<sup>805</sup> The Soviet Union held a position on UNRRA's Central Committee along with Britain, China, Canada and the United States – *UNRRA Charter 1943*, Article 3.3; TNA:PRO FO 371/51081 – FO Minutes, 20 January 1945; SHAEF To AGWAR, 1 January 1945.

Cross organisation of all nations' was reasonable.<sup>806</sup> The Foreign Office, however, thought such measures unnecessary. Citing the harsh reality of Soviet disapproval of the Swiss, the Foreign Office declared that mention of the ICRC at the conference would be a distraction to the participants' efforts to keep such a politically weighty meeting 'on the rails'.<sup>807</sup>

Although ostensibly this attitude towards the ICRC was for Moscow's benefit, it is unlikely that the British were entirely reluctant to oblige the Russian's prejudices. The only notable deviation of this policy was provided by P.S. Falla, a PWD staffer. In rejecting the ICRC's wishes his concern was not to placate the Russians, but to make sure that the Committee's neutrality was not compromised by having the organisation attached to the UN, which Falla astutely noted would 'either be discredited or at all events be deemed to "belong to" or side with one or other of the belligerents in any future conflicts.<sup>808</sup> This idea of protecting the ICRC's neutrality was the exception, however, not the rule.

As had been the case for most of the war, the British intended to manage the ICRC in the post-war period by allowing it only to perform functions that Whitehall thought acceptable. The Committee may have been the primary relief agency for German POWs and the *Volksdeutsche*, but it was not until October 1945 that the British drew up an agreement with the ICRC for relief action in the former's zone of occupation. In the interim, the Committee's delegates continued the established practice of the war's final weeks by brokering unofficial deals for relief with local military commanders.<sup>809</sup>

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<sup>806</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/50856 – BRC to Viscount Cranbourne, 13 April 1945.

<sup>807</sup> TNA:PRO FO 371/50856 – FO to Dominions Office, 20 April 1945.

<sup>808</sup> Ibid. – P.S. Falla to Gore-Booth, 12 May 1945.

<sup>809</sup> *ICRC Report*, vol.2, pp.427-28.



A similarly restrictive approach was taken by the British to the ICRC's promotion in June to the role of Protecting Power for German interests. This situation had developed from a combination of the Swiss Federal Council no longer recognising the German government and the Allies' dubious classification of German POWs under the newly-created category of war prisoner, Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEPs).<sup>810</sup> The statelessness of the SEPs meant that they were without a Protecting Power, a role for which the ICRC, having had a taste of intermediary work during the conflict, was quick to volunteer. In an indication that British war-time objections to such actions by Geneva were based on the assumption that Red Cross mediation might lead to peace overtures, Whitehall now saw no objection to the Committee's proposal. However, this permission was qualified by an emphasis in the DPW's official authorisation that the ICRC must be joined in this duty by the YMCA and that the former should under no circumstances be 'promoted to the status of diplomatic intermediary'.<sup>811</sup>

These incidents indicate that, on the subject of the ICRC's traditional sphere of humanitarian relief work and its more progressive pursuit of an intermediary role, the British continued their policy of restriction into the post-war period. As much as this policy was a continuation of wartime practice, the problem of Soviet relations with the West was also a factor in the furtherance of the British viewpoint. The creation and promotion of UNRRA over the ICRC was an action that was in accordance with both Russian and British

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<sup>810</sup> This was a classification that stripped German and Japanese prisoners of the right to the protection of the 1929 Geneva Convention. Restrictions were placed on the belligerent's ability to 'transform' the status of such POWs in this fashion in Article 5 of the 1949 Geneva Convention, yet still there is a similarity in status between SEPs and inmates presently held at Guantanamo Bay – *Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War* (Geneva, 1949) Article 5; Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, p.643.

<sup>811</sup> TNA:PRO FO 916/219 – FO Minutes, 23 May 1945; Minutes of DPW Meeting, 16 June 1945.

reservations over the ICRC. Although, ultimately, the politics of the early Cold War proved decisive in shaping Whitehall's actions, its reservations over the Committee were unjustified for a number of reasons.

In addition to the myriad examples of ICRC competence throughout the war, the threat of collusion between the Committee and Berlin had been removed and with it, in theory, any fears of ICRC misconduct. This, plus the fact that collaboration between the Committee and SHAEF during the wars' final weeks was both successful and, by May 1945, well established, should have helped to open the way to a more influential role for the ICRC in the post-war relief effort. That it did not is yet further evidence that, despite all that the British and their Allies experienced of the ICRC during the war, little was learned of the philanthropists from Geneva.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **THE ENDS AND THE MEANS**

Wartime relations between the International Committee of the Red Cross and the British government were characterised by two main issues: conflicting aims and British mistrust. The ICRC's objective was to provide impartial humanitarian assistance to *all* victims of war, civilian and POW, Axis and Allies and it ran counter to Whitehall's twin aims of pursuing "total war" through the means of blockade and safeguarding the welfare of British POWs above all other prisoners. Contributing to Whitehall's stance was its mistrust of the ICRC which was, in the main, due to its misinterpretation of the status, duties and character of the Committee.

Looking at these two issues at face value it is logical to conclude that British-ICRC wartime relations were inevitably doomed to fail. To accept this conclusion, however, is to reject the existence of the opportunities both sides had throughout the war to temper these differences and, in the process, improve their relationship.

Over the winter of 1940-41 the issue of POW relief and blockade concessions presented an opportunity that, if grasped, may have led to more cohesion in British-ICRC relations. At that time the ICRC, the BRC and the British government were all under fire for their apparent negligence in handling the POW crisis. The government, under pressure from both public and parliament, chose to shift the blame for this neglect onto the BRC and, through them, the ICRC. This course of action contributed to the already troubled relations between the three parties and, as a consequence, they struggled throughout the early months of 1941 even to maintain clear lines of communication with

each other. The result was an exacerbation of both the POW crisis and the publicity furore it engendered.

What was missed at this time was an opportunity for the ICRC, the BRC and Whitehall to form a united front against their detractors. Had this occurred the foundation would then have been laid for better relations in the immediate future. Furthermore, as these relations would have been built on the mutual interest of POW welfare, the British would have been forced to better understand the Committee's duties in regards to POWs.

Sadly, the difficulties encountered by the ICRC over the course of 1940 confirmed the suspicions of many in Whitehall that, despite its best intentions, the Committee was ill-equipped to conduct its duties and the opportunity was lost. The substance of Lucie Odier and Marcel Junod's meetings with the British in April 1941 – at which the ICRC delegates proposed blockade relaxations for the benefit of non-British POWs and internees – also affirmed British concerns over the Committee's apparent fixation with French victims of war. Had the British and the ICRC been drawn closer together during the tumult of late 1940 Whitehall might have better appreciated that the ICRC's work was, by its nature, impartial and that effort on behalf of non-British POWs was by no means a threat to British interests.

The extent to which this truth would have been welcomed by Whitehall is debatable – the British were not the first, and will not be the last, belligerent government to put the interests of its own POWs above all others. At the very least, however, a closer relationship with Geneva during the POW crisis may have helped the British realise that, in order to help British POWs, the ICRC's services to other prisoners would have to be improved. This lesson was not

learned by the British who were still, even in the final months of the war, imposing a "British POWs first" policy on their American allies.

To its credit the ICRC tried in 1940, but ultimately failed, to convince Whitehall that impartial POW relief was both in the spirit of the Geneva Convention and beneficial for British POWs. A degree of fault for this failure lay with both sides. The problem in the ICRC's case was that too much reliance was placed – particularly by Lucie Odier – on passion rather than pragmatism when conveying arguments to the British. Odier's admirable, yet naïve, views of the role of humanity in warfare were rejected by Whitehall, which at the time was struggling not only with the threat of a German invasion, but, also with a barrage of criticism over the handling of its policy concerning British POWs. In such circumstances British selfishness was understandable.

The utopian nature of Odier's proposals in the matter of blockade was particularly damaging to British-ICRC relations. Whitehall's reliance on blockade as a means of conducting "total war" was both justified by the military situation and legal under the laws of war. Accordingly, the ICRC had little grounds for protesting against the blockade from the point of view of either an impassioned humanitarian organisation or as the guardian of IHL. At this point the ICRC committed a cardinal error in its relations with the British: it failed to appreciate the importance Whitehall placed on the blockade. That is at least until Carl Burckhardt intervened in the matter in December 1940.

Carl Burckhardt's role in British-ICRC relations was a double-edged sword. His charm, intelligence and grasp of *realpolitik* set Burckhardt apart from his contemporaries in Geneva, yet it also raised suspicions in Britain over his motives and neutrality. Burckhardt's pre-war experiences with officials from

the Foreign Office proved invaluable to the ICRC in that it gave the Committee a familiar and credible face to present to Whitehall. However, Burckhardt's pre-war peace missions and friendship with Ernst von Weizsäcker, Wolfgang Krauel and British appeasement circles, meant that any credibility the ICRC gained from his presence was tainted with the stain of the appeaser. Because of his position as vice-president of the ICRC the Committee as a whole was affected by one man's dubious reputation.

The effect of this reputation on British-ICRC relations was apparent during the ICRC's campaign in Greece in 1941-42. The British, already convinced of the ICRC's amateurism by Odier's efforts, were even more suspicious of the Committee's intentions when Burckhardt began proposing ambitious relief plans that often involved assurances from Berlin. To Burckhardt's credit these schemes were shrewdly devised to appeal to British interests and address MEW's concern over the Committee's supervision capabilities, but there were two problems.

The first was that, despite the ICRC's reassurances, supplies were still being stolen by the occupation troops in Greece. This was a reality of occupation that could not be remedied then and is, even today, a plague on the ICRC's operations.<sup>812</sup> The second problem was that Odier's perceived amateurism and Burckhardt's prior relations with the Germans meant that no number of British-considerate plans from Geneva would have convinced Whitehall of the legitimacy of the ICRC's operations there.

Because the ICRC was not trusted in Greece the practical aspects of Burckhardt's expansion plans – the Joint Relief Commission, the White Ships

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<sup>812</sup> Some of the more recent examples of the seizure of ICRC supplies and the kidnapping of ICRC staff have occurred in the Philippines, Chad and the Sudan.

and, later, the Concentration Camp Parcel Scheme – served only to aggravate the Committee's detractors in Britain. Because of this frustration and mistrust MEW campaigned to weaken the ICRC's role in Greece by placing the operation in the hands of the Swedish Red Cross. Reprehensible as it may seem, the British campaign against the ICRC was not totally malicious.

The fact that MEW was willing to restructure the relief effort in Greece indicates that, in spite of all the hard-line talk of blockade enforcement, the influence of certain Foreign Office officials and increasing public scrutiny played a part in moderating the Ministry's policy. The importance of the ICRC's campaign against the blockade must also be considered as a factor in MEW's final decision.

The relentlessness of the Committee's appeals, and its willingness to try to work within MEW's blockade framework, added yet another set of voices to those in America, the Foreign Office and in the public sphere, which advocated relief in Greece. The fact that the Committee already had delegates on the ground in the region – whether ineffective as supervisors or not – meant that the British decision to loosen the blockade regulations by despatching the *Kurtulus* in October 1941 was easier than it otherwise would have been.

In the aftermath of the *Kurtulus* mission the ICRC again misjudged – or simply ignored – the feeling in Whitehall, pushing ahead with yet more schemes for increased shipping and securing British permission to form the White Ships fleet. As was so often the case for the ICRC, this triumph was one step forward and two steps back. In the aftermath of the White Ships negotiations the ICRC pushed harder than ever for more concessions. These attempts by Geneva to further enhance its recent gains were seen by the

British as evidence of the Committee's increasingly dangerous ambition and, rather than beating MEW into submission, they had the opposite effect.

Accordingly, by late 1942, MEW had formulated a policy that was also adopted, with only slightly less forcefulness, by other departments in Whitehall: the ICRC was to be ignored on blockade matters and directed solely towards maintaining the welfare of British POWs. Anything else was more trouble than it was worth to the British.

As much as Burckhardt and Odier's tactics influenced British opinion, the original source of the mistrust was the failure by Whitehall, in 1940, to accept that the scope of the ICRC's mission would always have to expand in response to the escalating conflict. Unable to get past this hurdle, all proposals from the ICRC – even the more sensibly constructed proposals of the war's middle years – were always going to encounter resistance from the British. The degree to which this lack of understanding impacted upon the lives of non-British POWs and civilian victims of war cannot be established with certainty. What is clear, however, is that only after the ICRC had begun expanding its operations in mid 1942 did the Committee start to achieve real success.

It was at this point that a second opportunity to improve British-ICRC relations arose – the rise of Carl Burckhardt to shadow president of the ICRC. Carl Burckhardt's ascension to power in Geneva was an important facet of the Committee's wartime development and, if his subsequent actions in the Shackling Crisis and the Katyn Affair are considered, it becomes clear that Burckhardt viewed his diplomatic skills as crucial in influencing the development of British-ICRC relations. For all his good intentions, however, Burckhardt could not be unshackled in British eyes from his past. With the exception of his few supporters – David Kelly, Rab Butler, Walter Roberts and



Duff Cooper<sup>813</sup> – by 1942 most British officials were firm in their assessment of Burckhardt as a *bête noire*.

Aware of the negative British view Burckhardt still sought to better relations between the British and the ICRC. The purpose of Burckhardt's campaign was twofold: to earn a more favourable British view of his expansion plans – which he hoped would soon focus more on the role of the Committee in humanitarian diplomacy – and to rebuild and enhance his own personal reputation. It was a very good attempt and, had his past not been so well known to the British, there is every chance that Burckhardt would have succeeded in his aims.

Burckhardt's success in the Shackling Crisis should have restored some of Whitehall's lost confidence in both the ability of the ICRC and its troublesome vice-president. However, as this achievement was effected outside of the Committee's traditional mandate and with the use of German informants, Burckhardt's mediation was generally regarded as further evidence of the ICRC straying outside of its directive. The Committee's non-involvement in the Katyn Affair was of some help to the ICRC's reputation in Britain if only because the Committee was perceived to be interfering a little less than normal.

Owing to Whitehall's pre-existing views of Burckhardt his efforts were never going to repair British-ICRC relations. In this regard, the opportunity was missed by both sides. Had the British accepted Burckhardt's efforts without consideration of his peaceable activities – which had ceased by 1942<sup>814</sup> – then

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<sup>813</sup> Cooper had pre-war contact with Burckhardt, who he found to be 'one of the most interesting and charming men you could meet' – TNA:PRO FO 371/21803 – Cooper to Halifax, 12 Aug 1938.

<sup>814</sup> See ch.2, pp.132-33.

British-ICRC relations may have improved. Conversely, had Burckhardt tempered his ambitions for developing ICRC "humanitarian diplomacy", as well as his own desire to be a diplomat extraordinaire, then perhaps the Foreign Office would not have viewed him as so meddlesome. MEW staffers might also have not perceived the ICRC as 'manoeuvring with more than usual vigour for the position of central agency for civilian relief in Europe'.<sup>815</sup>

The final opportunity both sides had to reach an understanding came in 1944-45 when the Third Reich was collapsing around thousands of hungry, exhausted POWs and civilian internees. In these circumstances, the constant problem, faced by belligerents and the ICRC, of how to co-ordinate humanitarianism with military operations was always going to be a factor. The eventual co-operation between the ICRC and SHAEF was an example of how much more efficient the Committee could be with the help of military muscle. Unfortunately, even at the dawn of the 21st century the UN and the ICRC were still attempting to implement such an 'integrated approach' as policy in war zones.<sup>816</sup>

As useful as such co-operation was, no amount of planning by the ICRC could have stopped bombing attacks on Red Cross ships, civilians and POWs. What could have been averted sooner, however, was the catastrophe that befell the prisoners on the March over the winter of 1944-45.

Owing in no small part to its position on the ground in the occupied territories, the ICRC foresaw the breakdown of the Third Reich's transport and communications infrastructure in ways that the British and their Allies simply

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<sup>815</sup> TNA:PRO FO 837/1214 – MEW to Co-Ordination Centre, Washington, 10 March 1943.

<sup>816</sup> Jean-Daniel Tauxe, 'The ICRC and Civil-Military Co-operation in Situations of Armed Conflict – 2 March 2000, *ICRC Website*, <http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/57JQBD?OpenDocument> (accessed 12 October 2009).

were unable to conceive. If one considers the stark fact that the Allies had a war to win then this apparent neglect is understandable. What is difficult to comprehend, however, is the extent to which the British ignored the harsh lessons of the 1940 POW crisis and then, once made cognisant of the problems of 1944, still chose to obstruct the ICRC's plans to alleviate the situation.

It was primarily Colonel Harry Phillimore, out of all the British officials concerned with these matters, who fully grasped the problems besetting British POWs in 1944. His plans to bring relief and rescue to POWs indicates that some token measure of consideration was put forward in Whitehall. However, rather than co-ordinate with the ICRC on these matters during the invasion, the British deemed such schemes to be too difficult. As a result, the ICRC was very much left to cope alone during the early stages of the Allied invasion of Europe.

Had British and, through them, American collaboration with the ICRC been better established, then schemes such as parcel depots, new supply routes and increased Red Cross transport, would not still have been in the discussion phase as the POW crisis reached its zenith over the winter of 1944-45. All of these proposals were first made by Geneva in mid 1944 but fell on deaf ears in Whitehall. They stand as stark evidence of the breakdown in the British-ICRC relationship. Years of poor relations, mistrust and a fair degree of mutual antipathy meant that at this crucial point in the conflict – from both military and humanitarian points of view – there was no common ground from which the primary humanitarian organisation in Europe and one of the major belligerent nations could work together.

This failure in 1944 reflects the many troubling parts of British-ICRC wartime relations. The ICRC's plans were perhaps too ambitious, and the means by which they were communicated to the British were, often, either too flimsy or too dense with particulars to be well received. Conversely, British views of the Committee's capabilities were too harsh and Whitehall's views of the ICRC's intentions too judgemental.

There was a major difference between the two sides' ability to acknowledge these problems and attempt to rectify them. The ICRC at least recognised the problems and tried to be more accommodating, mainly through Burckhardt's intervention, but had admittedly mixed results. Across the Channel, with the exception of Walter Roberts and Harry Phillimore, few in Whitehall acknowledged that there was a problem in British-ICRC relations which needed addressing.

In many ways this failure to recognise the extent of the problem was simply a continuance of Whitehall's long-held mantra that its armies could handle their own affairs when it came to humanitarianism in wartime. Accordingly, British relations with the ICRC only mattered when a crisis – often exacerbated by the poor state of those relations – ensued, such as in 1940 and 1944. In both these instances the British took too long to involve the ICRC in their plans and, once involved, were all too quick to cut the Committee off until the next time its services were urgently needed. British-ICRC relations, therefore, were in a constant state of disruption.

In the final assessment of the merits of the British and the ICRC and their relations in the Second World War, history sides with the ICRC. As disruptive as the Committee's activities may have appeared to the British at the time, its initiatives, championed by Burckhardt in particular, achieved something more

long-lasting than wartime co-operation from Whitehall. They provided the practical basis for the ICRC's post-war development into the global humanitarian institution it is today.

At the start of the war in 1939 the ICRC's right to intervene, even in matters outlined in the Geneva Convention as its core duties, was made possible only by Berlin and Whitehall's agreement to the Committee's reciprocal inspections of British and German POW camps. The right to mediate in POW affairs was not granted and the ICRC was to be consulted only if necessary and only to 'take part' in discussions between the belligerents and the Protecting Power.<sup>817</sup>

These limitations were breached by the ICRC's wartime activities. Burckhardt's successful mediation in the Shackling Crisis went beyond the role prescribed for the ICRC in the Geneva Convention. This role was further transformed by Burckhardt and Roland Marti's unauthorised negotiations with the SS for the protection of concentration camp inmates and POWs in 1945. In addition to these actions, the practical implementation of plans such as the White Ships and the Concentration Camp Parcel Scheme, were also far beyond the scope of the ICRC's traditional mandate. So too was the designation in 1945 of the ICRC as Protecting Power for the interests of German POWs, who, devoid of a state in the first months of peace, were no longer entitled to such representation. In this capacity the ICRC expanded the sphere of its duties even further by providing legal assistance to POWs.<sup>818</sup>

Although falling short of the grandiose role the ICRC may have envisaged in the first months of peace, these activities clearly represented the next stage of the expansion that Burckhardt had spearheaded during the war years. In

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<sup>817</sup> *Geneva Convention 1929*, Article 87.

<sup>818</sup> Durand, *Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, pp.645-46.

pursuing this expansion during the conflict – against British wishes – the ICRC was executing an essential humanitarian response to the realities of total war. The Committee was also completing a process that had begun in 1921, when it first put forward the idea of a new convention for the protection of civilians.

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The ICRC's right to provide relief for civilians was accepted in 1923 and statutes drafted to this effect at the Tokyo Conference in 1934. The outbreak of the war, however, meant that legal implementation during the conflict was still based on reciprocal agreement between the belligerents. After struggling with the lack of clarity on these issues throughout the war the notion of civilian protection and relief was top of the ICRC's agenda when it proposed a revision of the Geneva Convention – the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949.

In this document the ICRC was granted a right that Burckhardt, in particular, sought to attain during the war: the right to intervene in any conflict, be it international or civil, where the ICRC felt its services were required.<sup>820</sup>

Although far from perfect in terms of enforcement, the substance of the new Geneva Convention was in many ways an acknowledgement of the difficulties the ICRC experienced in carrying out its duties during the war.<sup>821</sup> As much as these difficulties have been, quite rightly, blamed on the occupation practices of the Germans, the savagery of the Eastern Front and the bombing of civilian targets by both Axis and Allies powers, this thesis has highlighted a less noted, though significant, difficulty faced by the ICRC: the attitude of the British government.

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<sup>819</sup> Best, *Humanity in Warfare*, pp.232-33.

<sup>820</sup> *Geneva Convention 1949*, Articles 3,10.

<sup>821</sup> Beaumont, Joan, 'Protecting Prisoners of War: 1939-95' in *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* eds. Fedorowich and Moore, pp.289-90.

It is tempting to conclude that Whitehall's poor relations with the ICRC resulted in little more than obstruction of the latter's goals. If one considers, however, that the negative British attitude forced the ICRC to adopt new shipping procedures, more expansive relief plans and a more pragmatic view of humanitarian diplomacy, then it is more fitting to conclude that the problems presented by the British to the ICRC were, in the end, advantageous to the latter. The ICRC's wartime development was an example of difficult means leading to surprisingly beneficial ends.

For their part, the British ended the war with a view of the ICRC that was relatively unchanged from that which prevailed in 1939-40. Burckhardt was still viewed with suspicion; the ICRC's sphere of activities was restricted during the immediate post-war period; Huber's 1945 protest at the forced repatriation of the *Volksdeutsche* went unanswered; and at the 1949 Geneva Conference the British delegates – concerned that the ICRC would use the occasion to propose new regulations on the practice of blockade – adopted an attitude of 'high handedness'.<sup>822</sup> The British desire to maintain the status quo in its relations with the ICRC and, wherever possible, to ignore the Committee, was still firmly in place despite all that the two parties had experienced during the Second World War.

A final expression of the British attitude is best evidenced by Churchill's reaction in 1946 to a planned visit to Geneva during which the ICRC was to host a luncheon in his honour. Confused over the nature of his hosts, Churchill requested a 'brief history of the International Red Cross and also a few notes about the chief personnel of the Red Cross'.<sup>823</sup> For Britain's wartime leader it

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<sup>822</sup> Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.553.

<sup>823</sup> *Churchill Archives*, Cambridge: Churchill College, CHURCH 2/244 – Snow to Gilliat, 5 September 1944.

was as if the ICRC – the protector of British POWs and chief opponent of the Prime Minister's cherished tactic of blockade – had seldom entered his thoughts.



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